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The Development of English Policy in Pakistan

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Abstract: The origins of Pakistan's English policy are rooted in the period of British colonial rule, during which English was established as a symbol of authority. Upon gaining independence, Pakistan adopted Urdu as the national language to forge a cohesive national identity. However, the designation of Urdu sparked linguistic tensions among various ethnic groups within the country. In response, English was designated as an official language, serving as a neutral medium amidst these disputes. As economic globalization progressed, the Pakistani government prioritized English education to bridge social class disparities through its democratization. In September 2015, the Supreme Court of Pakistan declared that the official language would revert to Urdu, in compliance with the 1973 Constitution. The current English policy in Pakistan is characterized by pragmatism, evident in the de-emphasis of English in governmental affairs and the promotion of its accessibility in educational settings. Despite these intentions, the implementation of this pragmatic approach has been inconsistent, potentially leading to unexpected consequences. The effectiveness of this policy in achieving its goals of social equity and linguistic harmony remains a subject of ongoing evaluation and debate.

Keywords: Language policy, English Education, Social Inequality, Pakistan

1. Introduction

As a multilingual post-colonial nation, there are between 70 and 80 languages spoken in Pakistan and English has occupied a prestigious status. Post-independence, English was designated as the official language, serving as a communicative link among governmental departments. Despite this, the ruling class has consistently promoted Urdu as the national language to consolidate a unified Pakistani identity, as enshrined in both the 1956 and 1973 Constitutions. The status of English as an official language was intended to be transitional, with the ultimate aim of reinstating Urdu. In the context of economic globalization, English has emerged as a form of cultural capital, indicative of modernization and expanded opportunities. The Pakistani government acknowledges that an increased English-speaking populace benefits the country's international relations and economic growth. However, access to quality English education has been historically limited to the elite, presenting challenges for the broader population seeking to enhance their prospects. In response, the successive Pakistani government, starting with the administration of Benazir Bhutto, has emphasized the equity of English education, enacting policies to increase public access. On September 8, 2015, the Supreme Court of Pakistan declared Urdu as the official language, replacing English. Despite this legal change, English continues to hold a prominent position in the spheres of power and administration, and educational policies and documentation continue to incorporate English instruction.

2. Literature review

Academic discourse surrounding Pakistan's English policy is multifaceted. There are some different value orientations normally:

The first is postcolonial lens, emphasizing the negative impact of the elitism of English education on Pakistan. Critics posit that the current language policy is essentially the elite class sponsoring English education in the name of efficiency and modernization, which further reduces the status of local languages and exacerbates national poverty [1]; Others contend that English education in Pakistan's elite schools has enabled privilege to be passed down from generation to generation, consolidating Pakistan's class structure [2]; Someone has pointed out the series of social problems caused by using English as a medium of instruction in Pakistan, and compared the current language policy to

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racial apartheid in education [3]. Some scholars, by analyzing the operation of English within the framework of power, believe that the elitism of English education is a replication of the imperialist structure of the colonial period [4].

On a more positive note, some researchers acknowledge English's role in enhancing social mobility and reducing economic disparity. Someone thinks that if English policies are not implemented effectively, English education may have the opposite effect to what is expected [5]. Someone supposes that we should accept the current situation and make new plans for the development of English [6]. Besides, some discussions based on the accommodativeism, advocating that while developing English education, we should also call for indigenous languages [7]. Or it may be argued that Pakistan English embodies South Asian Islamic values and, to some extent, expresses resistance to colonial discourse [8].

In conclusion, the academic community presents a diverse spectrum of perspectives on the English language policy in Pakistan. This paper will analyze the evolution of Pakistan's English policy and its societal impacts, drawing on historical research and current academic discussions.

3. The English language policy oriented towards the Pakistan identity construction

Upon gaining independence in 1947, Pakistan confronted a complex linguistic landscape. The nation was initially composed of five regions: Punjab, Balochistan, Sindh, North-west Frontier Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), and East Bengal. Urdu had been instrumental in the Pakistan Movement, serving as a rallying point for Muslim identity and a potent symbol. Despite its symbolic importance, Urdu was not widely spoken; Bengali was more prevalent. Post-independence, the debate over the national language ignited, with Bengalis advocating for Bengali as Pakistan's national language, leading to political unrest and language movements in 1948 and 1952. The national language controversy became an extremely sensitive political issue.

English emerged as a neutral compromise amidst this linguistic discord. The abrupt partition left Pakistan's fledgling state apparatus ill-prepared to adopt a new language overnight. The political fervor stirred by Bengali nationalism made the selection of either Urdu or Bengali as the national language a contentious issue, while the concurrent use of both threatened administrative chaos. The ruling elite's familiarity with English in governmental affairs further solidified its status. Consequently, Article 214 of the 1956 Constitution stipulated: (1) The State languages of Pakistan shall be Urdu and Bengali: Provided that for the period of twenty years from the Constitution Day, English shall continue to be used for all official purposes for which it was used in Pakistan immediately before the Constitution Day, and Parliament may by Act provide for the use of English after the expiration of the said period of twenty years, for such purposes as may be specified in that Act. (2) On the expiration of ten years from the Constitution Day, the President shall appoint a Commission to make recommendations for the replacement of English. (3) Nothing in this Article shall prevent a Provincial Government from replacing English by either of the State languages for use in that Province before the expiration of the said period of twenty years [9, p.64].

The 1956 Constitution granted English a transitional status. In order to foster a unified Pakistani national identity, the official language policy focused on the promotion of Urdu for a long time thereafter. On December 30, 1958, the Ayub Khan government established the Commission on National Education, and released a report in August of the following year, which clearly proposed a middle-of-the-road language policy to strengthen the status of Bengali and Urdu. However, the real power departments still operate through English, and being fluent in English is still a ticket to enter the core ruling circle [10, p.190]. The Yahya government issued a Proposal for a New Educational Policy in July 1969, which acknowledged the social divide created by English in pointed language: "One of the most important social and political problems facing Pakistan today and one which has a tremendous bearing on the question of national cohesion, is the fact that whereas the official language of the government and administration is English, that of the masses is not. There is almost a caste-like distinction between those who feel at ease in expressing themselves in English and those who do not" [11, p.14]. To solve this problem, the Plan proposed to unify the medium of instruction and administrative language in West Pakistan as Urdu, but this triggered opposition to Urdu among the Sindhis. Therefore, the New Education Policy of 1970, which was formulated based on the 1969 Plan, became more conservative, stating only that it "is important to safeguard against the division of society into several segments by ensuring equal access to educated opportunity", and also postponed the issue of replacing English with the national language until 1972, when a separate commission would be set up to deal with it [10, p.192]. With the intensification of separatist sentiment in East Pakistan and the impact of the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War, the New Education Policy of 1970 was not actually implemented.

Ali Bhutto's presidency, beginning in December 1971, was marked by continued linguistic tensions. After the division of East Pakistan, Urdu supporters in Pakistan were also ready to make a move. As early as 1970, Muhajirs (Urdu speakers) and Sindhis (Sindhi speakers) living in Sindh Province had violent clashes over the official language of Sindh Province. After Ali Bhutto came to power, he said that he would fulfill his campaign promise in Sindh Province and make Sindhi an official language in the province. Muhajir demanded that Urdu also enjoy official language status, but the proposed amendment was rejected by Parliament. On July 8, 1972, Urdu newspapers published headlines announcing that Urdu was dead. The news ignited the emotions of Urdu supporters and violent riots broke out in Sindh Province. The violence ended only when Ali Bhutto announced a reconciliation plan and visited Sindh [12, p.1014]. Urdu also gained support from Bhutto's political opponents. The National Awami Party (NAP) won a majority of seats

in the North-West Frontier Province and Balochistan in the 1970 general elections and announced in 1972 that it would choose Urdu as the official language of the North-West Frontier Province and Balochistan.

Whether it was the independence of East Pakistan or the language dispute in Sindh Province in 1972, Ali Bhutto realized the great power of linguistic nationalism. Bhutto believed that making Urdu the only national language would trigger opposition from many parties. In order to ease ethnic conflicts and balance the forces of various parties in the country, the official status of English was still retained. Article 251 of the 1973 Constitution provides for the national language policy 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 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 measures for the teaching, promotion and use of a provincial language in addition to the national language [13, p.149]. The 1973 Constitution retained English as an official language and gave Urdu a 15-year grace period. Similar to the 1956 Constitution, English was used as a solution to mitigate linguistic nationalism in the country and became a neutral language.

In July 1977, Zia-ul-Haq launched a military coup to overthrow the government of Ali Bhutto. Zia-ul-Haq was deeply influenced by Islam and insisted on "a unified Islamic Pakistan" and opposed "multi-ethnic Pakistan". He believed that Baloch, Pashtun, Sindhi and Punjabi people had no right to local autonomy. Urdu was vigorously promoted by Zia-ul-Haq as a symbol of Pakistani identity. All public schools were forced to use Urdu as the medium of instruction from the first grade, and English was not introduced until the sixth grade. In 1979, the National Language Authority (Muqtadira Urdu Zaban) was established to develop Urdu. During Zia's rule, Urdu began to be used more in official occasions such as conference speeches. Although Zia-ul-Haq's series of Urduization policies were supported by the Urdu lobby, they were generally not favored by all sectors of society. Because elite schools were not affected, their number increased sharply, and English teaching continued [14, p.25]. By the end of Zia-ul-Haq's rule, only some central agencies actually continued to use Urdu as the language of work, with many departments never using Urdu or reverting to English. Many independent observers agree that, apart from some superficial changes, the status of Urdu has not changed and English is still used in power areas [10, p.199].

In summary, Pakistan's English policy, under the value orientation of unified national construction, has been a critical balancing act. It has sought to navigate the challenges of linguistic nationalism, striving to establish a national identity while maintaining English as a neutral language in the spheres of governance.

4. The English language policy oriented towards pragmatic values

Following the conclusion of Zia-ul-Haq's military rule in 1988, successive governments led by Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif did not enact a new language policy. During this period, Benazir Bhutto was committed to the secularization and modernization of Pakistan. She realized that English was difficult to eradicate in Pakistan, whether due to political controversy or practical factors. Therefore, she believed that English should be popularized among more Pakistanis, rather than limited to the elite. During her first term from 1988 to 1990, Benazir Bhutto allowed schools to choose to use English as the medium of instruction for all subjects from the first grade. During her second term from 1993 to 1996, it was announced that all public schools would introduce English classes from the first grade instead of the sixth grade. The government claim that these measures would "bring children of poor [sic] at par with privileged class". The policies of the Benazir Bhutto government triggered opposition from her political opponents, who questioned that the country did not have enough finances to ensure the advancement of English teaching, and that investing huge amounts of money in education would impoverish the military, higher bureaucrats and other elite members. Benazir Bhutto's efforts ultimately failed to produce effective results, and English remained the exclusive domain of the elite [15, pp.243-244].

In 1999, Musharraf launched a coup to overthrow the Sharif government. One of the reasons for the coup was economic stagnation. His administration prioritized economic revitalization and foreign investment, recognizing English as crucial for global competitiveness. Developing the national English is an important part of Pakistan's participation in economic globalization, and the government must make arrangements to develop English language skills [14, p.25]. Post-9/11, Pakistan's strategic partnership with the U.S. and Western nations further emphasized the de-Islamization of its education system, with a focus on English. The United States believes that Islamic schools are the birthplace of terrorism [16, p.8]. Due to domestic and international context, the Musharraf government began to conceive a new national education policy in 2005 based on the review of the National Education Policy 1998-2010, and compiled a White Paper in 2007. Due to the political changes in Pakistan, until the end of Musharraf's rule, the new civilian government promulgated the National Education Policy in 2009 based on the 2007 White Paper [17, p.1].

The National Education Policy 2009 maintains a significant presence in educational and professional domains, stating that "English is an international language, and important for competition in a globalised world order" [17, p.4]. In the meantime, the policy also acknowledges the widespread inequality in Pakistan's education system. Most private and public schools do not have the capacity to develop the requisite proficiency levels in their students. A major bias of the job market for white collar jobs appears in the form of a candidate's proficiency in the English language. English

language also works as one of the sources for social stratification between the elite and the nonelite. Employment opportunities and social mobility associated with proficiency in the English language have generated an across the board demand for learning English language in the country. Therefore, the 2009 National Education Policy outlined measures for developing English education: including collaboration with educational stakeholders, integrating English into primary curricula, and using English for teaching science and mathematics from the fourth grade. Special emphasis was placed on providing English learning opportunities for socio-economically disadvantaged groups [17, pp.19-20].

On July 6, 2015, the federal government submitted a short-term plan for the promotion of Urdu language. The report says that all government or semi-government organisations are working under the federation would translate their policies, by-laws and all kinds of forms into Urdu, which will appear alongside with English versions within the next three months. They will also develop their web portals in Urdu. Further, the report notes that the government will affix names of all public places, including courts, police stations, hospitals, parks, educational institutions and banks in Urdu for the information of people within the prescribed time. All related signboards will also be fixed in Urdu. The government will also take steps so that information and documents printed by public offices, including passports offices, income tax office, AGPR, Auditor General of Pakistan, Wapda, Sui Gas, Election Commission of Pakistan and driving licence issuing authorities, as well as utility bills would be in Urdu and English within three months. The proceedings of all the official functions, receptions would also be conducted in Urdu within three months. For these purposes, the Institution for Promotion of National Language would play a central role [18]. On September 8, 2015, the Supreme Court of Pakistan announced that the government should grant Urdu official language status within three months and must pay compensation for violations of Article 251 of the Constitution, and translated the judgment into Urdu [19, p.268]. In November 2018, the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training issued the National Education Policy Framework, which specified an agreement on a multi-lingual policy, with English to be taught as a second language [20, p.11]. In the National Curriculum Framework released in 2020, English and Urdu were included in the unified curriculum planning [21].

Upon examining the evolution of Pakistan's English language policy, it is evident that a systematic English language policy has not been established. Instead, the policy is fragmented across the constitution, educational documents, and various policy reports. The focus of English policy lies primarily within governance and education sectors, with a trend towards de-emphasizing English in governance while expanding its role in education. Despite this trend, English maintains significant influence in governmental affairs; even after Urdu was declared the official language in 2015, English continues to be used by high-ranking officials in speeches and official communications [22]. The Central Senior Civil Services (CSS) examination also remains in English [23]. However, efforts to enhance English education have yielded limited success. The proficiency levels of public school students, both urban and rural, have not seen substantial improvement, with many failing to achieve even basic competency [24, p.70, p.80].

5. Conclusion

English, a vestige of British colonialism, pervasively influences administration, legislation, justice, and education in Pakistan. It serves as an instrumental tool for scientific and technological advancement, fostering individual and national economic growth. Mastery of English is often associated with elevated social status, conferring greater opportunities upon its speakers. For many Pakistanis, proficiency in English is a means to transcend socioeconomic barriers. In the context of economic globalization, the Pakistani government recognizes the importance of English in facilitating international engagement and promoting national development. The expansion of English education aligns with societal needs, reflecting the broader aspirations for global connectivity and competitiveness. Furthermore, the Pakistani elite has developed a path dependency on English, which remains the foundation for lawmaking, technological innovation, and the administration of significant national examinations. Consequently, it is anticipated that Pakistan will maintain a pragmatic approach to its English policy in the foreseeable future, recognizing its multifaceted role in the country's progress and integration into the global community.

The prevailing pragmatic approach to English education in Pakistan has introduced new challenges. The country's socio-economic context has prompted a significant exodus of English-educated professionals seeking improved opportunities overseas, resulting in a substantial financial loss for the government due to the high cost of their training. This brain drain has exacerbated Pakistan's shortage of skilled professionals and perpetuated poverty [25, p.85].

Furthermore, while English proficiency facilitates Pakistan's global integration, the overemphasis on a foreign language risks undermining the nation's historical consciousness and cultural identity, potentially deepening societal divisions. The policy, in essence, delegates the state's responsibility for enhancing citizens' well-being to individuals, suggesting that access to English education alone can secure a better life. This overlooks the entrenched structural issues within Pakistani society, effectively using inequality as a means to address inequality, which is a counterproductive strategy.

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