

# **The Compromise Candidature of English and the Unifying Slogan of Urdu: The Past and the Present of Pakistan's Linguistic Landscape**

**Dr. Muhammad Sheeraz**  
Department of English  
International Islamic University Islamabad

## **Abstract**

*Today's global spread of English has its colonial past in many parts of the world. It came to the sub-continent in the sixteenth century and was imposed as the official language in the nineteenth century. At the time of independence, for a variety of reasons, English was adopted as the official language of Pakistan, and Urdu as the national language. This was seen by many as a temporary arrangement as it was believed that Urdu would replace English once it is ready to function as the official language. However, it could not happen even today mainly due to the increasing international utility of English, as I discuss in this paper, and a very slow-paced development of Urdu.*

## **The Past: Arrival of English in the Subcontinent**

Surendra Sinha traces the history of the arrival of English language in the Subcontinent back in the late fifteenth century as he states: "The discovery of sea-route to India in 1498 by Vasco da Gama brought about new linguistic and literary associations with the West" (1978, p. 1). More realistically, Mahboob locates it in the sixteenth century stating: "English was first introduced in the Indo-Pak Subcontinent by the British in the 16<sup>th</sup> century" getting official recognition in 1835 through Macaulay's minutes (2009, p. 178). As it is obvious from these traces, it took English three centuries to hold the center stage in the linguistic diversity of the Subcontinent. "The introduction of English in India was slow and always beset with difficulties. As long as Portuguese stood in the way, English was spoken only in the area of its trade centers. For the transaction of daily business, interpreters called 'Dobasses' were much in demand" (Sinha, 1978, p. 6).

R. K. Yadav (1966) quotes Charles Grant who had been arguing during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century: "as the Muhammadans employed Persian, so should the English employ their own language in the affairs of the Government" (p. 25). However, incentives were necessary to make it attractive for the natives to learn English. "There is no unwillingness on

the part of the natives to learn the English language, there is no great disposition for it, except where they are likely to be employed in offices” (Basu as cited in Yadav, 1966, p. 25). So “access to salaried jobs” coupled with the attraction of access to “Western knowledge” made the natives decide in favor of English against the Oriental and Modern Indian languages (p. 26).

Braj Kachru (1983) gives a detailed overview of the arrival of the English language in South Asia. He divides the process of its arrival in three phases: *First phase: The missionaries*: who started arriving in India in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and opened many schools across the country. “It should be noted that during the earliest period the methodology of teaching and the language background of the teachers had great influence on SAE [South Asian English]” (p. 20-21). *Second Phase: The demand from the South Asian Public*: Raja Rammohun Roy is considered to be the earliest prominent figure from India to have demanded the English language to be taught in India during the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “Perhaps this was one way for Hindus to show their concern about the domination of Persian or Arabic; or perhaps this was done essentially for socioeconomic and educational reasons” (p. 21). Kachru goes on to say: “Macaulay’s hand was considerably strengthened by a small group of Indians led by Raja Rammohun Roy, who preferred English to Indian languages for academic, scientific and other international reasons” (p. 21); *Third Phase: The Government Policy*: This phase seems to have started in 1787 when “the Court of Directors of the East India Company appreciated the efforts of the Reverend Mr Swartz to establish two schools in Tanjore and Marwar for the children of soldiers, encouraging him with a grant of 250 pagodas<sup>1</sup> per year per school” (p. 21). Then came Macaulay’s controversial but very significant Minute of 1835, passed on 2 February. It was opposed by people such as H. T. Prinsep but the opposition couldn’t do much to stop Macaulay from his ambitious venture, using strong words like: “then will follow in due course the voting of Arabic and Persian to be dead and damned” and “a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India

---

<sup>1</sup> Pagoda was a coin made of gold.

and Arabia” (as cited in Kachru, 1983, p. 22). “The minute received the seal of approval from Lord William Bentinck, and on 7 March 1835, an official resolution endorsing Macaulay’s policy was passed. This firmly established the beginnings of the process of producing English-knowing bilinguals in India” (p. 22). The diffusion of English in India grew as more and more publications and schooling systems were established in the English language.

Other studies that review the history of English in the Sub-continent are: Sinha’s “The Triumphant March of the English Language (1760-1832) (1978);” Lewis’s “historical introduction” to the use of Anglo-Indian words (1991); Rahman’s *Language and Politics in Pakistan* (1996) and *Language, Ideology and Power: Language Learning among the Muslims of Pakistan and North India* (2002); Mahboob’s “No English, no future: Language policy in Pakistan” (2002), and most importantly, Ahmed Ali’s “English in South Asia: A historical perspective” (1993).

Ahmed Ali traces the history of English in the Subcontinent and studies its development in the region. Ali states that the argument that was put forward by William Bentinck (Governor General 1825-35) at the time of its implementation as official language was that English was “the key to all improvements...” (1993, p. 6) and abolished “Persian, the centuries-old official court language, as well as Arabic and Sanskrit and the Indian languages including Urdu, the common lingua franca..., as worthless, and Indian knowledge and learning and Eastern culture and civilization as barbaric” (p. 6). Bentinck’s resolution of 7 March 1835, clearly emphasizes a need for a new kind of education of science and literature to native Indians “through the medium of English language” (Spear as cited in Ali, 1993, p. 7). Apparently, it seems that this medium was used primarily for the sake of the convenience of the ‘educators’. But Thomas Babington (Lord) Macaulay’s “well-known minute of the same year, which called for the production of ‘a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour [sic!], but English in taste and character, in morals and in intellect’” (Ali, 1993, p. 7), shows that it was very deliberate on part of the rulers to spread the English language in India and through that produce “a class to which many of us South Asians now belong” (p. 7).

Leaders like Gandhi opposed Macaulay's launch of the English language in strong words: "To give millions a knowledge of English is to enslave them. The foundation that Macaulay laid of education has enslaved us" (as cited in Luhar, 2012, p. 2). As Ali summarizes, "It was from that time that the government started setting up schools and colleges to convert Indians, the South Asians of today, into brown Englishmen by imparting Western knowledge in the English language to them, a tradition their surrogates have followed to this day" (1993, p. 7).

### **The Present: Post-Independence Linguistic Landscapes**

Many of the Post-World War 2 nation states faced a crisis while deciding their official and national languages, with most of them passionately adopting their own languages. However, for centuries, scholars in various disciplines have attempted to construct a universal language for the whole world through which people could communicate with each other, but all such attempts at constructing any artificial code language failed (Schneider, 2007). In the late twentieth century, a 'natural' language emerged to serve the coveted purpose of direct communication globally, a change rightly termed by David Crystal as a "language revolution" (as cited in Schneider, 2007, p. 1). The English language is becoming "the global lingua franca" (McArthur, 2001, p. 1): it is now "in great *demand* worldwide" (Phillipson, 2009, p. 11) and seems to be "EVERYWHERE" (Kachru & Smith, 2008, p. 1) as the "indispensable global medium" (Kandiah, 2001, p. 112).

So, more recently, given the globalized nature of the world and the position of the English language as its lingua franca, even many of those countries who had a repulsive attitude towards English, and had completely abrogated it, are now accepting it at different levels. Several European countries including Finland, France, Czech, Belgium, Austria, Poland and Netherlands have now fully or partially adopted the English language as medium of instruction in their higher education, with internationalization as major rationale (see Coleman, 2006, p. 7). Several studies, particularly those in economics of language (see for example Casale & Posel, 2011), have explored the reasons and nature of this shift.

There is no denying the fact that the question of which language should be used as the official language is crucial and very difficult to address. Interestingly it has been a matter of concern for the policy makers and linguists in almost every part of the world and has been keenly studied in a variety of contexts, including Australia (see Leitner, 2004), Africa (see Bobda, 2004; Ngcobo, 2009; Kadenge & Nkomo, 2011), Europe (see Phillipson, 2006; Tender & Vihalemm, 2009; Hogan & Brun, 2010; Jorgensen, 2012), Asia (see Brown & Ganguli, 2003), and of course, South Asia (see, for instance, Saxena & Borin, 2006).

Commenting on the place of English in current language planning in South Asia, Kachru states, “English continues as an important *link language* for national and international purposes” (1983, p. 52). Language in Pakistan has been more a political issue than communication tool. Indeed, it is believed to have cost Pakistan its eastern half in 1971. Immediately after independence, Pakistan had to deal with many issues: e.g., a large number of immigrants from India, economic crisis, and the absence of industry, educational and health facilities. With a multilingual population of five provinces, each of them having more than one language of their own, deciding what the official language of the country would be was one of the most challenging questions. A unifying slogan during the independence movement was that Urdu would be the language of the country. This slogan was maintained even after independence, despite the fact that the majority of East Pakistanis (now Bangladeshis) wanted to have Bengali as the official language, at least within their part of the country. The status of Urdu as official language could not, however, be implemented in the country. Symbolically, for the sake of integrity Urdu was declared as the national language. Haque gives the reason for it as he states:

The state apparatus, which had to be setup overnight from nothing, could not bear the burden of having to start with a new official language. The use of English was inevitable for system maintenance: the ruling elite were trained to do their official work in English. English perforce continued to be the official language of Pakistan. (1993, p. 14)

It might be true that at the time of partition, when the political and bureaucratic elite had many things to fix, they preferred the “compromise candidate” (p. 14) English out of compulsion. But in later years, particularly after the separation of the Eastern wing of the country and thus end of the Urdu-Bengali controversy, Urdu’s not being implemented as the official language hints deliberate neglect, as there is now no Urdu-Bengali controversy to make English qualify as a compromise candidate.

The 1973 Constitution of Pakistan 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. (as cited in Peaslee, 1985, p. 1090)

Despite the presence of this section in the 1973 constitution that establishes Urdu as the official language by law after fifteen years i.e. 1988, Urdu could not be made an official language of the country.

Thus, English, once the compromise candidate, quickly became a status symbol for many. Its privilege transferred to its speakers. The following event, related by Harris Khalique, is an illuminating example of how other languages in comparison to English were looked down upon:

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?" (n.d., p. 101)

This incident actually reflects the attitudes of the bureaucracy towards Urdu and English. The degradation of Urdu against English and that of other Pakistani languages against both Urdu and English continues even today. Therefore, while code switching from Urdu into English shows refinement and knowledgeability of the speakers, the reverse is taken as lack of proficiency in English and felt as cultural shame.

It is, however, now debatable whether the country can really afford the reversal i.e., replacing English with Urdu, as having English as the official language and the language of instruction in post-secondary education has its own advantages of global importance. So, there is a strong realization among many "that the world continues to shrink with the onset of communications revolutions and relentless advances in communication technology; the invasion of the bedroom by television via satellite has made a certain degree of universal cultural uniformity, if not cohesion, inevitable" (Haque, 1993, p. 15). With the advent of internet and mobile technology that have invaded all aspects of life, today it is not just the policy-making elite who would prefer English to be learned and used but almost all the individuals belonging to the middle and upper classes as it is a visa to the internet metropolis where they could browse to do many activities: play, purchase, learn, teach, talk, etc. "English, the primary vehicle of international communication even among non-native speakers, is a passport to international, cultural, and metropolitan citizenship" (p. 15). Its status as lingua franca of the world has many advantages to countries like Pakistan which have adopted it as one of their major languages. "This has helped us in our efforts to play a leadership role in many areas of the world of diplomacy – in the Third World, in the Islamic bloc, in international agencies, and especially in the technical subcommittees of these organizations" (p. 15). Therefore, "the English language retains a position of undeniable importance in the country" (Khan & Lindley, 1993, p. 19). However, it is true that with the adoption of a foreign language, some unknown degree of cultural loss is always caused and "our cultural preferences, our

instruments of analysis, our categories of thought, our very modes of thinking, will be determined for us by those who own and control this language... and that with our moorings in English we would always be subject to easy intellectual manipulation, always a step behind” (Haque, 1993, p. 16). So, owing to this debate, the position of English in Pakistan remains “both vitally important and highly controversial” (p. 16).

Haque admits that “it may not be possible to alter the position of the English language in the national set-up radically, or to reduce its role across the board by fiat” (1993, p. 17). If so, what about the cultural loss that is being talked much about? This is where the process of indigenization of English, that has already started, sounds legitimate. It is assumed by many that non-native English is *already* a de-ethnicized or minimally ethnicized language (Saleemi, 1993, p. 34).

Pointing out the attitude towards English in Pakistan, Bapsi Sidhwa (1993) relates her example and states:

My use of English in writing my novels has not been seriously questioned in Pakistan. Without putting in so many words, it is accepted that because of British colonization English is with us to stay, and whether we like it or not it has become a useful tool: a means of communication with the rest of the world, and together with Urdu, a link, elitist if you will, between people who speak different languages within the country. (p. 213)

This seems to be a reality in the present day Pakistan, where despite lot of hue and cry about the implementation of local languages as medium of instruction, the policy makers particularly in the federal capital are not willing to do away with English.

### **Indigenous Literature in English**

The history of the arrival of English literature in the subcontinent coincides with the arrival of the English themselves. Ismail Talib is of the view: “English literature can be said to have spread together with the expansion of the English language. What began as the spread of English



literature later resulted in the growth of literature in the language, written by non-English writers” (2002, p. 9).

In their essay “English and Indian English Literature”, Williams and Wanchoo trace the history of the subcontinent literature in English in the following words:

It is commonly believed that the introduction of English in India in the early nineteenth century led to a proficiency in the language amongst the educated Indian middle class; but, we must remember that Indians, such as Din Muhammad (1759-1851), Cavelli Venkata Boriah (1776-1803), and Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831), were writing in English much before the official advent of English in India. (2008, p. 84)

Whatever the reason, these writers were writing fiction in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. “The initial writing in English that began in early nineteenth century arose from Bengal, especially with the writing of poetry in English” (William & Wanchoo, 2008, p. 92). Sake Dean Mahomet was perhaps the first from the Subcontinent who used English in his *Travels of Dean Mahomet in 1794*. However, as his name, which would be ‘Sheikh Din Muhammad’ originally as quoted by William and Wanchoo in the above extract, itself shows, almost all the book was anglicized. The earliest novel in English from the Subcontinent was *Rajmohan’s Wife* by Bankim Chandra, published in 1864 (Khair, 2001, p. 46). William and Wanchoo opine:

There are scholars who believe that the Indian novel in English arose after 1857, expressing the changed sociopolitical reality in India...whatever be the truth, the fact remains that the Indian novel in English has been an important literary genre to embody the social and political aspirations. (2008, p. 96)

The Sub-continental novels in English, as states Muthiah, “were written as early as the 1860s, only in the 1930s did Indian writers begin to experiment creatively with the lexical expressions and syntax of the English language to indigenize the novel” (2009, p. 1). Knupabai Saththianadhan (1862-1894), the author of *Kamala: A story of Hindu life* and *Saguna: A story of native Christian life* (1995), is believed to be the

first female Indian novelist writing in English (Muthiah, 2009, p. 41). In the late 1940s, the Subcontinent was partitioned into India and Pakistan, and immediately after the Independence, there started the story of Pakistani fiction.

The story of the Pakistani novel in English starts with tragedy and unrealised potential. In 1948, within a year of partition, 36-year-old Mumtaz Shahnawaz was killed in a plane crash, leaving behind the first draft of her partition novel, *A Heart Divided*. Her family published it in the 1950s.... (Shamsie, 2011, para.1)

During the 1940s, 50s and even 60s, a considerable bulk of fiction in Urdu and other Pakistani languages was published but there was no remarkable addition to the list of fiction in the English language on the literary horizon of Pakistan during these years.

Today, however, Pakistan is witnessing a brilliant blossoming of talent in its highly visible international English-language writers. From Zulfikar Ghose, Bapsi Sidhwa and Sara Suleri, a new generation of names come quickly to mind – Kamila Shamsie, Mohsin Hamid, Aamer Hussein, Nadeem Aslam, Mohammed Hanif, M A Farooqi, Daniyal Mueenuddin and H M Naqvi, among several others.(Gokhale, 2011, para. 4)

These and some other authors from Pakistan (e.g., Maneeza Naqvi, Nafeesa Haji, Omar Shahid Hamid, Ali Sethi, Shazaf Fatima Haider, Bina Shah, Saba Imtiaz, Soniah Kamal, Kanza Javed, to name a few), through their writings on a variety of distinctive themes and of creative styles, produced a good bunch of Pakistani literature in English. Their works pick to fictionalize from the local themes of socioeconomic disparity, feudalism, political mechanics, poverty, religious extremism and oppression, the interrelationship of love, sex and money, to the international themes of civilizational clash, terrorism, stereotyping, etc.

Apart from literature, the Pakistani canvas of English is spreading through local and international print and electronic media, and through the social media. It is being used for academic purposes in the higher education. The number of schools adopting English as a medium of

instruction at the primary, elementary and secondary levels is also increasing.

### **Conclusion**

English came to the Sub-continent with the force of the colonizers and the courtesy of the missionaries. It became a compromise candidate for official language at the time of the independence of Pakistan. But today owing to its increasing role in all fields, policy makers of the country find it difficult to replace it with the relatively very less developed languages.

## References

- Ali, A. (1993). English in South Asia: A historical perspective. In R. J. Baumgardner (Ed.), *The English language in Pakistan* (3-12). Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Bobda, A. S. (2004). Linguistic apartheid: English language policy in Africa. *English Today*, 77(2o/1), 19-26.
- Brown, M. E., & Ganguly, S. (Eds.). (2003). *Fighting words: Language policy and ethnic relations in Asia*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Casale, D., & Posel, D. (2011). English language proficiency and earnings in a developing country: The case of South Africa. *The Journal of Socio-Economics*. 40, 385-393.
- Coleman, J. A. (2006). English-medium teaching in European higher education. *Language Teaching*, 39(1), 1-14.
- Gokhale, N. (2011). These songs do not die. Retrieved from <http://himalmag.com/himalfeed/53/4611-these-songs-do-not-die.html>
- Haque, A. R. (1993). The position and status of English in Pakistan. In R. J. Baumgardner (Ed.), *The English language in Pakistan* (13-18). Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Hogan, G. (2010). Language, education policy and transformation in  
Humm, P., Stigant, P., & Widdowson, P. (1986). *Popular fictions: Essays in literature and history*. London: Methuen & Co.
- Jorgensen, J. N. (2012). Ideologies and norms in language and education policies in Europe and their relationship with everyday language behaviours. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*. 25(1), 57-71.
- Kachru, B. B. (1983). *The Indianization of English: The English language in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Kachru, Y., & Smith, L. (2008). *Cultures, contexts and World Englishes*. New York: Routledge.
- Kadenge, M., & Nkomo, D. (2011). Language policy, translation and language development in Zimbabwe. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, 29(3), 259-274. DOI: 10.2989/16073614.2011.647488.
- Kandiah, T. (2001). 'Whose meanings?' Probing the dialects of English as a global language. In Robbie Goh et al. (Eds.), *Ariels – departures and returns: A festschrift for Edwin Thumboo*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.

- Khair, T. (2001). *Babu fictions: Alienation in contemporary Indian English novels*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Khan, S. A., & Lindley, J. A. (1993). English language publishing in Pakistan. In R. J. Baumgardner (Ed.), *The English language in Pakistan (19-30)*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Leitner, G. (2004). *Australia's Many Voices: Australian English – The National Language*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Lewis, I. (1991). Sahibs, Nabobs and Boxwallahs. A Dictionary of the words of Anglo-India. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Luhar, S. (2012). Dharma of student, teacher and education in present context: A Gandhian perspective. *Golden Research Thoughts*, 2(3). Retrieved from <http://aygrt.isrj.net/UploadedData/975.pdf>
- Mahboob, A. (2002). No English, no future: Language policy in Pakistan. In S. Obeng and B. Hartford (Eds.), *Political Independence with Linguistic Servitude: The Politics about Languages in the Developing World*. New York: NOVA Science.
- Mahboob, A. (2009). English as an Islamic language: A case study of Pakistani English. *World Englishes*, 28(2), 175–189.
- McArthur, T. (2001). World Englishes and World Englishes: Trends, tensions, varieties, and standards. *Lang. Tech.* 34, 1-20.
- Muthiah, K. (2009). Fictionalized Indian English speech and the representations of ideology in Indian novels in English. Retrieved from UNT Digital Library website: <http://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc12168/>
- Ngcobo, M. N. (2009). A strategic promotion of language use in multilingual South Africa: Information and communication. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, 27(1), 113–120. DOI: 10.2989/SALALS.2009.27.1.9.757.
- Peaslee, A. J. (1985). *Constitutions of nations*. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Phillipson, R. (2006). English, a cuckoo in the European higher education Nest of languages? *European Journal of English Studies*, 10 (1), 13-32. DOI: 10.1080/13825570600590846.
- Phillipson, R. (2009). *Linguistic imperialism continued*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Rahman, T. (1991). *A history of Pakistani literature in English*. Lahore: Vanguard.

- Rahman, T. (2002). *Language, ideology and power: Language learning among the Muslims of Pakistan and North India*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Saleemi, A. P. (1993). English in non-native use: A second-language view. In R. J. Baumgardner (Ed.), *The English language in Pakistan* (33-40). Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Saxena, A. & Borin, L. (Eds). (2006). *Lesser-Known Languages of South Asia: Status and Policies, Case Studies and Applications of Information Technology*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Schneider, E. W. (2007). *Postcolonial English: Varieties around the world*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Shamsie, K. (2011). Another side of the story. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/aug/14/fiction>
- Sinha, Surendra P. (1978). *English in India*. Patna: Janaki Prakashan.
- Tender, T., & Vihalemm, T. (2009). "Two languages in addition to mother tongue" – will this policy preserve linguistic diversity in Europe? *Trames*, 13(63/58), 1, 41–63.
- Williams, M., & Wanchoo, R. (2008). *Representing India: Literature, politics, and identities*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Yadav, R. K. (1966). *The Indian language problem*. Delhi: National Publishing House.