



How to cite: Nawaz, M. H., Munir, H., Ikhtiar, A., Umair, M., & Anwar, B. (2024). Pakistani Educational Policies and Language Ideologies: A Critical Discourse Analysis. *World conference on future innovations and sustainable solutions*. Futurity Research Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13896497>

Pakistani Educational Policies and Language Ideologies: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Accepted: September 23, 2024 | **Published:** October 7, 2024 | **Language:** English

Abstract: This study investigates the relationship between educational policies and language ideologies in Pakistan, analyzing how language shapes national identity, social hierarchies, and access to power. Employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) through Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model, the research critically examines the ideologies embedded in official language policies and their manifestation in educational practices. The study explores the role of English, Urdu, and regional languages in constructing identities, perpetuating socio-economic inequalities, and influencing public discourse. It highlights how language choices within the educational system reflect broader struggles over power and ideology, reinforcing or challenging existing social structures. This analysis contributes



to understanding the dynamics between language, education, and power in Pakistan's multilingual context.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Language ideologies, educational policies, Power and identity, Pakistan's multilingualism

Introduction

the complex role that language policies play in shaping national identity, social structures, and access to power in Pakistan (Pardesi & Shahriar, 2020). Historically, these policies have been deeply influenced by political, cultural, and social dynamics, resulting in tensions surrounding the choice of medium of instruction in educational institutions. English, Urdu, and regional languages each hold significant cultural and ideological weight, with competing factions promoting one over the other based on their political and social objectives. The medium of instruction has become a site of ideological conflict, reflecting broader struggles over national identity, class division, and social mobility (Schmid, 2001). English, often associated with power, prestige, and global opportunities, is favored by the elite, while Urdu, seen as the national language, serves as a unifying force. Meanwhile, regional languages represent cultural heritage and local identity, yet are often marginalized in formal education. These competing ideologies create a hierarchy of languages, reinforcing social stratification and limiting access to educational and economic opportunities for certain groups (Woolard, 2020).

The study uses Norman Fairclough's model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to critically examine how these language policies perpetuate or challenge existing power structures (Upadhyaya, 2010). Fairclough's three-dimensional model, which includes textual analysis, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice, provides a framework for uncovering the hidden power relations embedded within educational language policies. The introduction sets the stage for exploring how language, as both a tool of communication and a symbol of power, contributes to social inequality in Pakistan, and how these dynamics are maintained or contested within the educational system.

Background

The background of the study provides a detailed overview of the linguistic landscape in Pakistan and its historical evolution, setting the context for the critical examination of language policies (Hashmi et al., 2024). Pakistan is a linguistically diverse country, with over 70 languages spoken across various regions. Despite this diversity, Urdu and English have become the dominant languages in the public sphere, each symbolizing different aspects of national and socio-political identity. Urdu is viewed as the national language, representing Pakistani identity and unity, while English is tied to global modernity, economic progress, governance, and elite status (Hashmi et al., 2024). The marginalization of regional languages, despite being spoken by large portions of the population, highlights a key area of concern. These languages, though rich in cultural heritage and local identity, are often excluded from formal education and public discourse. The emphasis on Urdu and English in the educational and political



domains creates a hierarchy, reinforcing the dominance of these languages and sidelining regional ones (Khurshid, 2009).

The colonial legacy plays a pivotal role in shaping this linguistic hierarchy. During British rule, English was introduced as the language of governance, education, and administration, and after independence, it retained its privileged status. While efforts were made post-independence to promote Urdu as a unifying language for national identity, English continued to dominate in key sectors such as higher education, government institutions, and business (Bianco, 2003). This has led to a stark division between English-medium and Urdu-medium schools, where English-medium institutions, often serving the elite, are seen as pathways to socio-economic mobility and success, while Urdu-medium schools cater to the broader population. This dichotomy has deepened social inequalities, as proficiency in English remains a marker of status and access to opportunities in Pakistan (Manan, 2015). The background of the study is essential for understanding how these historical and socio-political factors contribute to ongoing language ideologies and their impact on educational policies, identity formation, and social stratification in Pakistan (Durrani, 2012).

Theoretical Framework: Critical Discourse Analysis

This study utilizes Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as developed by Norman Fairclough, to analyze the relationship between language, power, and ideology (Fairclough, 2013). CDA is a multidisciplinary approach that focuses on how discourse, or language use, constructs social realities and perpetuates power structures within society (Milani & Johnson, 2008). Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how language operates in various contexts to reinforce or challenge these power relations.

1. Textual Analysis:

This dimension focuses on the linguistic features of a text, examining its vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, and rhetorical devices. Through textual analysis, the study investigates how language policies are represented in educational texts, such as government documents, policy statements, and curricula (Taylor*, 2004). The choice of words, phrasing, and linguistic features often reflects the ideologies and power relations embedded in these texts. For instance, the dominance of English in formal education may be reflected through specific terminology that conveys authority or prestige, while regional languages might be marginalized through omission or minimal representation.

2. Discursive Practice:

Discursive practice refers to how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed, and it focuses on intertextuality—how one text relates to other texts (Pälli, Vaara, & Sorsa, 2009). This dimension examines the process of policy-making and implementation in the educational sector. It explores how language ideologies are disseminated through institutions and how different participants, such as educators, policymakers, and students, engage with and reproduce these ideologies. By analyzing intertextual connections, this study identifies patterns in how language ideologies are reinforced



through repeated discourses across different contexts, such as school curriculums and media narratives.

3. Social Practice:

The third dimension of CDA situates discourse within the broader socio-political context, analyzing how societal power structures and ideologies influence language use (Kress, 1990). This dimension investigates the socio-historical and political factors shaping language policies in Pakistan, such as the colonial legacy, post-independence nation-building efforts, and globalization (Ullah, 2020). It addresses how the dominance of English and Urdu reflects deeper power imbalances and contributes to the perpetuation of social hierarchies, including access to education and economic mobility. By linking discourse to social practice, the study uncovers how language policies serve to either maintain or challenge existing inequalities in Pakistan's educational system.

Through this theoretical framework, the study critically analyzes how educational language policies in Pakistan are constructed and how they reflect broader struggles over power and identity (Manan, David, & Channa, 2019). CDA provides the tools to uncover the hidden ideological forces behind these policies and the impact they have on shaping social hierarchies, particularly in the multilingual context of Pakistan.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine key educational policy documents in Pakistan, including the National Education Policy (2009), the Punjab Education Sector Reform Program (PESRP), and the National Curriculum Framework (2017). The analysis focuses on various sources, such as speeches, policy papers, and official statements related to language use in education, to trace the discourse surrounding language ideologies. The methodology follows Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA, which involves three interconnected stages: textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. In the textual analysis stage, the researcher investigates linguistic features—such as vocabulary choices and grammatical structures—within the selected documents to identify how language is used to frame educational policies and convey specific ideologies. The discursive practice stage explores how these texts are produced, distributed, and consumed, emphasizing the roles of various stakeholders in engaging with the language ideologies presented. Finally, the social practice stage situates the analysis within the broader socio-political context, examining how historical and political factors, including colonial legacies and national identity formation, shape language policies in Pakistan. This comprehensive methodology enables a nuanced understanding of the ideological underpinnings of educational policies and their implications for social hierarchies and power dynamics in a linguistically diverse society.



Analysis and Discussion

The Dominance of English: A Marker of Elite Status

English continues to dominate Pakistan's education system, particularly in elite private schools and higher education institutions. The language is associated with modernity, progress, and global connectivity, reinforcing its status as a marker of socio-economic privilege. Educational policies, such as the 2009 National Education Policy, emphasize the importance of English for international competitiveness, framing it as a necessary tool for economic development.

However, the privileging of English has significant social consequences. It creates a divide between those who have access to English-medium education and those who are confined to Urdu- or regional-language mediums. This linguistic divide mirrors the broader socio-economic disparities in Pakistan, with English-medium education often associated with better job prospects, higher income, and greater social mobility. Thus, English serves as a gatekeeper to power and privilege, reinforcing existing social hierarchies.

Urdu as the National Language: Unifying or Exclusionary?

Urdu, as the national language, is often positioned as a symbol of national unity. Educational policies emphasize the promotion of Urdu to foster a sense of Pakistani identity and cohesion. However, this discourse often marginalizes speakers of regional languages, who may feel excluded from the national narrative. The emphasis on Urdu in educational policies reflects a centralizing tendency in Pakistani politics, where linguistic homogeneity is seen as essential to national unity.

Despite its symbolic importance, Urdu's role in education is complicated by its secondary status to English in terms of socio-economic mobility. While Urdu-medium schools are widespread, they are often perceived as inferior to English-medium institutions, particularly in terms of quality and outcomes. This creates a paradox where the national language is both celebrated and sidelined, contributing to linguistic and social inequalities.

Regional Languages: Marginalization and Resistance

Regional languages such as Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, and Balochi have historically been marginalized in Pakistan's educational policies. Despite the constitutional recognition of linguistic diversity, educational policies rarely prioritize the promotion or preservation of regional languages. This marginalization reflects broader patterns of political and economic centralization, where the languages of peripheral regions are subordinated to the dominant national and official languages.

However, there are instances of resistance to this linguistic marginalization. Movements advocating for the inclusion of regional languages in education and public life have emerged in various parts of the country. For example, Sindhi is used as a medium of instruction in schools in Sindh, while efforts are underway to promote Pashto and Balochi in educational settings. These movements challenge the hegemonic position of Urdu and English, advocating for a more inclusive linguistic policy that recognizes the country's linguistic diversity.



Conclusion

The analysis of Pakistan's educational policies reveals that language ideologies are deeply intertwined with issues of power, identity, and social stratification. The dominance of English reinforces socio-economic inequalities, while the promotion of Urdu as a national language often marginalizes speakers of regional languages. Despite these challenges, there are ongoing efforts to resist linguistic marginalization and promote greater inclusivity in educational language policies.

By applying Critical Discourse Analysis to the discourse surrounding educational policies, this study highlights the need for a more equitable approach to language planning in Pakistan. Policymakers must recognize the importance of linguistic diversity and address the social inequalities perpetuated by current language ideologies. A more inclusive language policy that values all linguistic communities could contribute to a more just and cohesive society.

Recommendations

- **Inclusive Language Policies:** There is a need to promote regional languages alongside Urdu and English in educational institutions to reflect the country's linguistic diversity.
- **Equity in Language Education:** Reforms should focus on reducing the disparity between English-medium and Urdu-medium schools to ensure equal opportunities for students from different socio-economic backgrounds.
- **Teacher Training:** Professional development programs for teachers should be introduced to enhance their ability to teach in both Urdu and English effectively, while also incorporating regional languages where necessary.

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