The Medium of Instruction Controversy in Pakistan

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Pakistan has five major indigenous languages — Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Siraiki and Baluchi — while the national language is Urdu. The language used in the domains of power (like the higher bureaucracy, and the officer corps of the armed forces) is English, as it was during British rule. This paper traces the controversy about the medium of instruction in Pakistan, beginning with the use of English for elitist education in pre-partition days. This policy was meant to consolidate the empire because the English-educated Anglicised elite would support British rule in its own interest. The masses were taught, at the lower levels, in the vernacular — which was taken to be Urdu in all the provinces except Sind, where Sindhi was used. This policy produced office workers in subordinate positions at low cost. In present-day Pakistan, too, the elite are educated in expensive English-medium schools, whereas Urdu is used in most other schools, including those of urban Sind which have majorities of mother-tongue Urdu speakers. This medium of instruction policy is opposed by the indigenously educated (the Urdu-medium) proto-elite, who would find entry into positions of power easier if Urdu was used and nobody was educated in English.

Introduction

The choice of medium of instruction, an aspect of status planning, is a political matter. It is in the hands of the ruling elite[1] and is, therefore, necessarily influenced by their perceived interests. These interests may include the consolidation and perpetuation of rule; facilitation of the elite's entry into positions of power; modernisation and nation-building; and creation of an integrated nation-state out of disparate ethnic groups (Cooper, 1989). This paper explores the controversy about the medium of instruction in Pakistan in relation to politics, especially ethnic politics. Other relevant issues, however, such as bilingualism and societal attitudes towards languages have not been dealt with here because of lack of space. They have, however, been given attention in more detailed studies of language planning (Rahman, 1995a) and the history of language controversies in Pakistan (Rahman, 1996a).

The languages of Pakistan, given by percentages of speakers (from the 1981 Census), are as follows: Punjabi (48.2%), Pashto (13.2%), Sindhi (11.8%), Siraiki (9.5%), Urdu (7.6%), Baluchi (3%), Hind Ko (2.4%), Brahvi (1.2%) and others (Khowar, Gujrati, Shina, Balti, Kohistani, Brushaski, Wakhi etc. (2.8%).

However, Sindhi and (to a lesser extent) Pashto are the only indigenous languages used as the medium of instruction. Urdu, which is not indigenous to Pakistan, [2] but which is now the mother tongue of the urban population of Karachi and Hyderabad, is the national language and the most commonly used medium of instruction in government schools. Urdu came to occupy this position soon after independence. According to the Census of 1951:

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> Urdu is the the normal medium of instruction in primary and middle schools in West Pakistan except where instruction is given in Sindhi, Pushto or English and even there Urdu is taught as the second language. In West Pakistan therefore as a general rule most people who can write at all, write Urdu. (Census, 1951: 74)

Other evidence to support the contention that Urdu is the most commonly used medium of instruction in government schools, including those of the Mohajir-dominated cities of Sind, will be given in the sections on Sindhi and Pashto. English is the medium of instruction in elitist schools — armed forces schools, public schools, private English-medium schools — and at the university level.

This privileged position of English is challenged by those (called the Urdu proto-elite here; Rahman, 1996b) who want it to be replaced by Urdu. However, Urdu itself is challenged by the supporters of indigenous languages — i.e. the regionalists or ethno-nationalists. As these positions are related to the power struggle between the Westernised ruling elite and the indigenous proto-elite, on the one hand, and between the centre and the periphery, on the other, the medium of instruction controversy has political dimensions. These will be explored in this paper, which also provides a chronological history of the debates.

The Orientalist-Anglicist Controversy

The coming of the British marked the beginning of the modern age in India. The professional middle class, especially the bureaucracy, increased, and the state became the biggest employer. This meant that the language chosen by the state to run the bureaucracy was the key to power. During the Muslim rule in India, this language was Persian. The Orientalists were Englishmen who thought Persian should remain while the Anglicists were those who wanted it to be replaced by English.

Descriptions of the controversy are available in several historical accounts (Nurullah & Naik, 1943; Pachori, 1990). What is relevant here is that the Orientalists felt that teaching English would alienate the native intelligentsia and precipitate a rebellion. The Anglicists, however, reasoned that the teaching of English would create an Anglicised elite which would be loyal to British rule since it would owe its power and social status to it. Thus, English would consolidate the empire. In other words, both the Orientalist and Anglicist policies had a political rationale — that of consolidating the new found empire (Rahman, 1996c).

In 1835, in response to the pressure of the Anglicists — among whom Trevelyan (1838) and Macaulay (1835) were prominent — Lord William Bentinck, the Governor General (who was himself an Anglicist imperialist: see his letters to Trevelyan, in Philips, 1977), changed the medium of instruction to English and opted for Anglicisation. The language of the Courts, too, was changed in 1837. But it was not to be English. It was to be the vernacular — a 'language which they (the natives) understand' (Resolution of the Governor General dated 4 September 1839, in Malaviya, 1897: 49).

The Vernacular-English Controversy in the British Period.

In the enthusiasm for Anglicisation the vernaculars were neglected in the early nineteenth century. Some Englishmen, notably Sir Erskine Perry of the Bombay Presidency, championed the cause of English (Richey, 1922) while others opposed it. Among the opponents were George Jervis, who felt that the Anglicised elite would be 'isolated by their very superiority' from other natives (Jervis, 1847: 12). This controversy was settled by the Governor General-in-Council's decision to support education in the vernaculars (Richey, 1922).

As elitist jobs, including those in the covenanted civil service (ICS), became available through English, Indians manifested a keen desire to acquire it (RPI Oudh, 1869; RPI Punjab, 1871, 1877, 1888, etc.). *The Wood's Despatch* of 1854 laid down the policy of imparting Western knowledge through English, and the Education Commission of 1882 (1883) also continued the same policy. Lord Curzon, a supporter of vernacularisation, noted that 'in the pursuit of English education the cultivation of vernaculars is neglected' in a conference in Simla in 1904 (Basu, 1947: 63–64). This contributed to the increase of vernacularisation.

The Indian nationalist politicians supported vernacularisation but they were divided as to *which* vernacular to offer in place of English. The Hindus regarded Hindi as a symbol of their identity and pride, while the Muslims saw Urdu in the same light. Thus the Hindi-Urdu controversy entered into all attempts at vernacularisation (for the controversy see Brass, 1974; Dittmer, 1972; Robinson, 1974).

Gandhi emphasised the mother tongue, and the Zakir Hussain Committee declared that it was 'the foundation of all education' (Hussain, 1938: 17). But, the Muslims complained after the experience of Congress rule in 1936, it turned out to be the imposition of Hindi, while Urdu was ignored (Jang, 1940).

In any case, the Indian elite and the British themselves did not want vernacularisation at all levels, so that it was only up to the high school level that the vernaculars were introduced. Higher education continued to be given in English. Even at the high school level, the vernaculars were used only in Government schools which catered for the masses. The aristocracy sent their sons to the chiefs' colleges where they were supposed to 'learn the English language, and {become} sufficiently familiar with English customs' (Raleigh, 1906: 245). The professional middle class sent their children to European or convent schools (Sharp, 1918), which excluded most Indians on grounds of birth or poverty. The chiefs' colleges, for instance, were only for the sons of the princes of India. The European schools, which admitted from 10–20% Indians, were expensive — 'the cost per pupil in Anglo-Indian and European institutions being Rs156 against Rs14 only in all types of institutions from a university to a primary school' (*Education in India*, 1941: 113).

Thus the masses, who were educated through the vernaculars, could only aspire for and obtain subordinate positions in the bureaucracy. The most powerful positions were reserved for Englishmen or Indians who had mastered English through education in English-medium institutions or who were of outstanding ability. The policy of vernacularisation of mass education had created a huge lower bureaucracy which did not have to be imported from England. It was this lower 'salariat' — to use Alavi's (1987) term — which became

the anti-English lobby, or the vernacular proto-elite as I have called it, in independent Pakistan. The Anglicised elite — the upper salariat — became the ruling elite. The medium of instruction controversy can thus be understood in the light of the power struggle between the various elites or sections of the salariat.

Urdu as the Medium of Instruction

Urdu had been a symbol of Muslim identity during the Hindi-Urdu controversy, as we have seen. In independent Pakistan, the Muslim League leaders who formed the government still associated it with Islamic and Pakistani identity. Moreover, they also felt that only Urdu could be used to integrate the diverse nationalities of Pakistan. Thus they propounded the uni-national thesis — that Pakistanis are one people — and chose Urdu as the national language. In the enthusiasm for Pakistan there was no visible resistance to this policy decision. In the Punjab, an Official Language Committee was formed in 1949 to replace English terms by Urdu ones (ABE, 1955). It was also recommended that English be replaced by Urdu, even in the universities (ABE, 1949), while secondary education should be in Urdu (ABE, 1955).

However, despite the consensus that Urdu should replace English, elitist schools — such as cadet colleges — kept multiplying (ABE, 1958), particularly after Ayub Khan's imposition of martial law. Even earlier, as a serving general, he urged politicians 'to start good public schools where intelligent young men' could be trained to become officers (Khan, 1967: 25). As the ruler of the country he appointed the Commission on National Education, commonly called the Sharif Commission, which defended these elitist institutions in the name of efficiency and modernisation (CNE, 1959). The Hamoodur Rahman Commission, set up to investigate the causes of student unrest, criticised those universities which had adopted Urdu as a medium of examination in the BA, and it, too, defended the elitist schools on the same grounds as the report of 1959 (RCSP, 1966).

The Urdu proto-elite kept up its pro-Urdu movement, demanding that sign boards should be in Urdu (*Pakistan Times*, 21 February 1961), that proceedings of meetings be in Urdu (Abdullah, 1976) and that people should be motivated to demand its use in the administration, judiciary and education — i.e. the domains of power. However, despite all the efforts of the Urdu lobby, the elitist officer corps of the higher administration, judiciary and the military kept using English. Higher education, especially in scientific and technological subjects, also continued to be given in English. In 1969 Ayub Khan's government fell and General Yahya replaced him. Yahya's government appointed a committee, with Air Marshal Nur Khan at its head, to overhaul the educational system. This committee recommended that English should not remain the medium of instruction in Pakistan. Instead, Urdu and Bengali should be used by 1975 (PNEP, 1969). There was much protest by the supporters of English and the regional languages. (I shall deal with both kinds of protest later). During the Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) government of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto (1971–1977), Urdu was supported by Bhutto's opponents: the National Awami Party and Jamiat-e-Ulema-i-Islam in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Baluchistan

(Amin, 1988). The PPP, therefore, did not champion the cause of Urdu as that would be playing into the hands of the opposition. The Urdu lobby comprised religious people who opposed Bhutto; in fact, the Urdu conferences of the Urdu lobby (Abdullah, 1976; Zulfiqar & Akhtar, 1986) served as anti-PPP platforms. Thus Bhutto, too, did not do much to promote the use of Urdu in the domains of power.

During General Zia Ul Haq's martial-law period (1977–1988), the right-wing Urdu lobby came into its own, encouraged by the general, who used Urdu and Islam as symbols of Pakistani and Muslim identity. Zia created the Muqtadra Qaumi Zaban (the National Language Authority) in 1979 and ordered that Urdu be the medium of instruction in all schools (*Pakistan Times*, 4 February 1979). Thus, in 1989, the matriculation examination would only be in Urdu. However, before the elitist English-medium schools could be abolished, General Zia was persuaded to change his mind, and English was allowed as a medium of instruction in some schools (*Pakistan Times*, 28 October 1987). Since then, despite several years of democratic rule, the medium of instruction has remained English in elitist institutions.

It appears that liberal-humanists and even left-leaning members of the intelligentsia support English, as in Benazir Bhutto's two tenures (1988–1990 and 1993–1996) and at other times, because Urdu is associated with the conservatives who would prefer a stricter implementation of the *shari'ah* or fundamentalist interpretations of it.

The Ethno-Nationalist Opposition to Urdu

The elitist opposition to Urdu is in the form of veiled resistance. Except under cover of efficiency, international communication or modernisation, the English-using elite does not oppose Urdu. The supporters of the regional or indigenous languages of Pakistan, however, oppose it openly and clearly.

The first opposition to Urdu came from the Bengali Language Movement between 1948 to 1954. Despite Jinnah's condemnation of the Movement in March 1948, it grew, and the police killed some of its supporters in Dhaka on 21 February 1952 (Alam, 1991; Kabir, 1987; Umar, 1970). This caused a lingering resentment which eventually led to the demand for Bangladesh, which emerged in 1971 (Zaheer, 1994). Although Bengali was recognised as a national language in 1956, it had once been used as a symbol of the growing alienation of East Bengal from West Pakistan. The language movement made Bengali a symbol of the resistance to West Pakistani domination. In that sense it contributed to the emergence of Bangladesh.

In West Pakistan it was Sindhi which had been well established in the domains of power at the lower levels. When the non-Muslims left Sind in 1947, the Urdu-speaking Mohajirs took their place (Census, 1951). Even in 1981 the Mohajirs comprised 22.6% of the population of Sind, while the Sindhis amounted to 52.4%. However, the big cities of Karachi and Hyderabad were dominated by the Mohajirs (Census, 1981). In other words, Sind was, for all practical purposes, partitioned between Sindhis and non-Sindhis. The power-struggle between the two communities was expressed through the Urdu-Sindhi medium of instruction controversy.

Even in 1948, only one year after the birth of Pakistan, there were 69 Urdu-medium schools with 18,440 pupils in Sind, and 57 Sindhi-medium schools with only 6,965 pupils (ABE, 1950: 59). In 1954 there were 187 Urdu-medium schools and 76 Sindhi-medium ones (LAD-Sind, 20 December 1972: 53) and later, during Ayub Khan's rule (1958–1969), about 30 primary Sindhi-medium schools were closed down (LAD-Sind, 29 May 1974: 30).

The central government's support of Urdu adversely affected the status of Sindhi. In *The Report on National Education*, Urdu was given 'the same position in Sind as in the rest of West Pakistan' (CNE, 1959: 284). This meant that Sindhi, which was a medium of instruction up to matriculation, would now be replaced by Urdu. The Sindhis protested (Jafar, 1992) and Sindhi's former status was restored (Rashdi, 1984). However, some Sindhi-medium schools were closed down as mentioned above, and the use of the language was officially curtailed (LAD-Sind, 19 November 1973).

In 1966, the increasingly ethno-nationalistic student pressure groups in Sind tried to persuade the University of Sind to use Sindhi as the medium of instruction and examination (Baloch n.d.). However, the government did not allow the University to take this step.

Nur Khan's proposed *New Education Policy* again raised the status of Urdu at the expense of Sindhi. And, once again, the Sindhi nationalists, who were now being increasingly influenced by G.M. Syed, protested — pointing out that this would mean the conversion of 10,000 Sindhi-medium primary schools to Urdu-medium ones (Talpur, 1969). Once again, the government did not take this drastic step, but it could not contain the rise of ethnicity in Sind.

In 1970 the Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education and Sind University decided to promote the use of Sindhi. This was resented by the Mohajirs, who agitated against the decision, and there were language riots in January–February 1971. The polarisation between the Mohajirs and Sindhis continued and Bhutto's PPP government inherited it when it came to power in 1971. The Sind PPP moved the Sind (Teaching, promotion and use of Sindhi Language) bill of 1972, which would make both Sindhi and Urdu compulsory subjects of study in classes IV to XII, and knowledge of Sindhi necessary for jobs in Sind (LAD-Sind, 7 July 1952). The Mohajirs protested and there were riots which led to loss of life and property (LAD-Pakistan, 28 August 1972; for details see Rahman, 1995b).

Since then, the Mohajirs have increased in power and their political organisation, the Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM), supports Urdu. The situation is that Sindhi is used in rural schools where Sindhis dominate, while its teaching in the those cities of Sind where Mohajirs dominate, such as Karachi, is perfunctory at best.

The case of Sindhi has been given in detail because it was the only language which was actually used in the domains of power — albeit at the lower level — in the area now called Pakistan, in British days. In the Punjab, North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan, Urdu was used as the vernacular. The language movements here were faced with the task of replacing Urdu, and along with that of fighting to maintain the status of their language (as in Sind) (details of these language movements are in Rahman, 1996a).

In the North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan, language was linked with ethno-nationalism. The Khudai Khidmatgar Movement of Khan Ghaffar Khan, as well as his son's (Wali Khan's) party (first the National Awami Party and then the Awami National Party), emphasised Pashto as an identity marker of the Pakhtuns (Ghaffar, 1969; see also *Pakhtun*). As they were associated with the irredentist claims of Afghanistan in the North West Frontier Province — the Pakhtunistan idea — the ruling elite mistrusted Pashto. That is why it was only in 1984 that it was allowed as a medium of instruction in some schools of the North West Frontier Province. Even then, it was resisted by the Pakhtuns because of its ghettoising potential, as a report on Pashto pointed out (Education Department, 1991). Indeed, one of the findings of the report was that it 'was not introduced simultaneously in all primary schools nor was it being taught as a subject in Urdu-medium schools' (Education Department, 1991:1–4). Even where it was taught, it was not taught efficiently, and the number of government schools using it as a medium of instruction remained much smaller than those using Urdu and English (US AID, 1990; Rahman, 1996a: 148–150; for the Pashto language movement see Rahman, 1995d).

In Baluchistan, language has been a component of ethno-nationalism (Rahman, 1996d), which is one reason why Baluchi is still not a medium of instruction in schools. Another one is lack of standardisation and the ghettoising potential. Moreover, Baluchistan is a multi-ethnic province and the capital Quetta, which is also the largest city, has more non-Baluchi speakers than Baluchi ones.

In the Punjab, the homeland of the dominant ethnic group, Punjabi is neglected while Urdu is promoted as the language of culture and national integration. This is in the interest of the predominantly Punjabi ruling elite because Urdu gives it a wider base of support, a wider area to rule and seek jobs in, than the Punjab itself. The denial of medium-of-instruction status to Punjabi, even at the primary level of schooling, is also used to justify the promotion of Urdu, used as a symbol of national integration by the elite. The Punjabi Movement is, however, weak — even in Lahore (Shackle, 1970). Its basis is more socio-psychological than political. The proponents of the movement want Punjabi to be used in schools and other domains so as to preserve their culture and self-respect as Punjabis. (See the emotional tone of most activists in Qaisar & Pal, 1988; see also Kammi, 1988).

The Siraiki Movement — a language movement from southern Punjab — aims at making Siraiki the medium of instruction in schools. It too has a political dimension. The Siraikis want to carve out a province of their own from the Punjab. The movement is an expression of the frustration which comes of under-development and what is perceived as a variant of 'internal colonialism' by the activists of the movement (Rahman, 1995e).

Conclusion

English remains the language of power and high social status in Pakistan. It serves to facilitate the entry of the rich and the powerful into elitist positions, while filtering out those who are educated in Urdu. At the rhetorical level, however, the ruling elite appears to support Urdu. This is because it uses Urdu

as a symbol of integration which would keep it dominant over a wider power base than would be possible in a loose federation.

This support of Urdu by the centre is resented by the peripheries — the ethno-nationalist proto-elite of Sind, the North West Frontier Province, Baluchistan and, to a lesser extent, the Siraiki area. They want to promote the use of their own languages as media of instruction in pursuance of the multi-ethnic thesis — i.e. that the federating units are inhabited by different ethno-cultural groups and, hence, should be given maximum autonomy (or even independence). This is denied by the Pakistani nationalists and the ruling elite, which leads to a perpetual power struggle between the central and the ethno-nationalist elites.

Thus the medium of instruction controversy can be seen as a part of the power struggle between different pressure groups, or elites and proto-elites, in Pakistan.

Notes

1. For definitions of elite, power and influence in Pakistan, I have followed Hussain (1979), who divides the ruling elite into the landed elite (LE), bureaucratic elite (BE), military elite (ME), professional elite (PE) and religious elite (RE). The RE, however, has never held real power; this has remained in the hands of the military and the bureaucracy and, through them, the LE. The PE (i.e. lawyers, technical experts, and so on) also possess power, but only as bureaucrats. These are not part of the ruling elite, but may be allied to it. The term proto-elite is not used by Hussain. It is, however, useful for describing those members of a pressure group who 'are (or feel) excluded from the power and influence they covet and who possess the personal gifts or material resources to move symbols and masses toward desired socio-political regrouping' (Fishman, 1972: 15).
2. An 'indigenous' language means one which was spoken as a mother tongue by the inhabitants of the area now called Pakistan before 1947. Urdu now does have mother tongue speakers born in Pakistan but their parents or grandparents came from India. Mahmood Shirani has, however, argued that Urdu was born in the Punjab, around Lahore, after the Muslim conquests of the Punjab after 1000 CE and that it later moved to northern India (Shirani, 1928), but this theory needs substantiation.

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