

# Linguistic Capital and Symbolic Violence in Pakistan: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Language Attitudes Towards Urdu and English

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## ABSTRACT

This research investigates the complex language attitudes and ideologies surrounding English and Urdu in the contemporary sociolinguistic landscape of Pakistan. Utilizing a quantitative survey of 80 respondents, primarily from urban and educated backgrounds, the study examines how speakers perceive the social, economic, and symbolic value associated with English in comparison to Urdu. The analysis is informed by the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly his concepts of linguistic capital and symbolic power, as well as the framework of Standard Language Ideology (SLI), which explains how certain language varieties become socially legitimized and associated with authority and prestige. The findings reveal a clear hierarchical relationship between the two languages, where English is widely perceived as an essential resource for socioeconomic advancement and professional recognition. A substantial majority of respondents associated English with global opportunities and academic achievement, with 96.3% agreeing that English is necessary for international development and 93.8% viewing it as crucial for academic success. At the same time, the data highlights a strong ideological tension regarding the role of English in relation to Urdu. While English is valued for its instrumental benefits, many respondents also expressed concern about its influence on national linguistic identity, with 72.6% agreeing that the growing dominance of English may threaten the status of Urdu as a symbol of national unity and cultural heritage. In addition to these ideological tensions, the study also identifies the psychological and social consequences associated with the unequal status of languages. More than half of the respondents (55%) reported feeling judged or evaluated negatively when they make mistakes while speaking English, and 48.8% indicated that they experience social pressure to use English in formal or professional contexts. These responses suggest that language use in Pakistan is not only a matter of communication but also a mechanism through which social hierarchies are reproduced. Taken together, the findings support the argument that the dominance of English can operate as a form of symbolic power that privileges certain linguistic competencies while marginalizing others. In line with Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, the internalization of these hierarchies may lead speakers to accept linguistic inequality as natural or inevitable. The study therefore highlights important implications for language policy, suggesting the need for more balanced and inclusive approaches that recognize both the practical advantages of English and the cultural and symbolic significance of Urdu within Pakistan's multilingual society.

## INTRODUCTION

The linguistic landscape of Pakistan is characterized by a complex interplay of postcolonial legacies, nationalistic aspirations, and the pressures of global neoliberalism. Since its inception in 1947, the state has grappled with the challenge of defining a national identity through language while maintaining the administrative and economic structures inherited from British colonial rule. This has resulted in a hierarchical linguistic market where English, Urdu, and a multitude of regional languages compete for symbolic and material resources.

In this context, language is not merely a means of communication but a potent form of social capital. The dominance of English in the domains of higher education, the judiciary, and high-stakes employment has created a "schooling divide," where access to English-medium instruction often dictates an individual's trajectory for social mobility. Conversely, while Urdu serves as a crucial symbol of national unity and identity, its instrumental value is frequently perceived as secondary to English in the professional marketplace. Regional languages, despite being the mother tongues of the majority, are often marginalized in formal settings, leading to what scholars describe as "linguistic cringe" or "static maintenance syndrome."

This study aims to investigate the contemporary language attitudes and ideologies of Urdu speakers in Pakistan, focusing on how they navigate the competing values of global mobility and national identity. By analyzing a survey of 80 respondents, the research explores the extent to which Bourdieu's concepts of linguistic capital and symbolic violence explain the internal and social tensions experienced by Pakistanis. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

1. How do Urdu speakers in Pakistan perceive the social, economic, and symbolic value of English versus Urdu?
2. To what extent do demographic factors influence these language attitudes?
3. How do Pakistanis experience and negotiate the tension between English and Urdu?

Through a detailed analysis of survey data and a synthesis of recent literature, this paper argues that the linguistic market in Pakistan is structured by a standard language ideology that privileges English as a marker of elite status, thereby marginalizing other linguistic identities and imposing significant psychological costs on speakers.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical Framework: Bourdieu's Linguistic Market

Central to understanding language attitudes in a postcolonial context is Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the linguistic market. Bourdieu posits that language is a form of "linguistic capital" that can be converted into other forms of capital, such as economic or social capital. The value of a particular language or variety is determined within a "field"—a structured social space with its own rules of valuation. In Pakistan, the field of high-stakes education and professional employment is dominated by English, which functions as the most prestigious form of capital.

Bourdieu further introduces the concept of "habitus"—the internal system of dispositions and perceptions acquired through socialization and education. An individual's habitus determines how they perceive the value of their own language and the languages of others. In a linguistic market where one variety is dominant, speakers of "subordinate" varieties often internalize the hierarchy, leading to "misrecognition." This occurs when the arbitrary dominance of a language is viewed as "natural" or "inherently superior" rather than as a product of historical and political power dynamics.

The operation of this hierarchy constitutes "symbolic power" or "symbolic violence." Symbolic violence is the process whereby dominated groups unknowingly participate in their own subordination by accepting the legitimacy of the dominant language and devaluing their own linguistic heritage. In Pakistan, this is evident in the aspiration for English-medium education even among those who may never achieve fluency, as they recognize its "market value" despite the exclusion it may facilitate.

### Standard Language Ideology and Symbolic Power

Standard Language Ideology refers to a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, and homogenous "standard" language, which is typically identified with the usage of the upper-middle class. This ideology positions the standard variety as the only "correct" and "logical" form of the language, while other varieties are dismissed as "slang," "uneducated," or "corrupt." In the Pakistani context, SLI operates on two levels: the positioning of English as a global standard of modernity, and the positioning of "Standard Urdu" as the national standard of education and culture.

The promotion of a standard language often serves to reinforce social hierarchies. Those who possess the standard variety are granted access to institutional power, while those who do not are marginalized. In Pakistan, the preference for "British English" over "Pakistani English" among learners reflects an internalization of external standards of prestige. This ideology creates a situation where language proficiency becomes a gatekeeping mechanism, excluding those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who have not had access to high-quality English-medium instruction.

### **Linguistic Insecurity and Linguistic Cringe**

A direct consequence of symbolic violence and SLI is linguistic insecurity—the feeling of inadequacy or anxiety experienced by speakers when they perceive their own speech as failing to meet the "standard." In Pakistan, this is particularly acute among students from Urdu- or regional-language backgrounds who enter English-dominant academic environments. Research has documented that these students often feel "linguistic cringe"—a deep-seated sense of shame about their mother tongues, which they associate with a lack of cultural capital or a "rustic" identity.

This cringe is often reinforced by institutional practices. For instance, elite English schools may enforce "English-only" policies and penalize students for speaking local languages. This leads to what scholars call "static maintenance syndrome," where speakers express sentimental attachment to their mother tongues but pragmatically abandon them in favor of Urdu and English for the sake of social and economic survival. The psychological cost of this shift is significant, manifesting as anxiety, self-consciousness, and a fragmented sense of identity.

### **The Sociolinguistic Context of Pakistan**

The linguistic hierarchy in Pakistan is a product of its colonial history and postcolonial policy choices. Under British rule, English was established as the language of power and administration, a status it has largely maintained. Post-independence, Urdu was designated as the national language to foster a unified identity among a linguistically diverse population. However, this policy often marginalized regional languages, leading to ethnic tensions.

The current landscape is defined by a "schooling divide." On one side are the private, elite English-medium schools that cater to the wealthy and prepare students for global markets. On the other are the government-run Urdu-medium schools that serve the lower and middle classes. This divide reproduces class inequalities, as English proficiency remains the primary determinant of success in the most lucrative sectors of the economy.

Recent policy shifts, such as the 2009 move toward multilingual education, have attempted to address these inequalities. However, the practical implementation remains challenging, as the "market demand" for English continues to drive educational choices.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design and Instrument**

This study employed a quantitative survey method to gather measurable and comparable data on the language attitudes of Urdu speakers in Pakistan. A 15-item questionnaire was developed using a 5-point Likert scale. The instrument was designed to capture multiple dimensions of language attitudes:

- a. Instrumental/Economic Value
- b. Status/Prestige
- c. Identity/Solidarity
- d. Affective/Experiential

#### e. Policy/Prescriptive

The survey was administered via Google Forms.

### Sampling and Participants

A total of 80 respondents participated in the study. The sample was recruited through the personal and professional networks of the four researchers, covering urban centers such as Islamabad, Peshawar, and regions across Punjab. The demographic profile of the respondents is as follows:

- a. Age: 15-20 years, 21-25 years, 26-30 years, 31-40 years, and 41+ years. Notably, a majority of the sample was under the age of 30.
- b. Education: Matric/O-Levels, Intermediate/A-Levels, Bachelor's Degree, Master's
- c. Degree, and MPhil/PhD. The sample is highly educated, with most holding a Bachelor's degree or higher.

The sample reflects a bias toward young, urban, and highly educated individuals, who are arguably the most active participants in the modern linguistic market of Pakistan.

### Data Analysis Procedures

The data were analyzed by calculating mean scores for each survey item to identify overall patterns of agreement. Thematic analysis was then applied to group the findings into the key dimensions mentioned above. Demographic variations based on age and education were also examined.

## RESULTS

### Instrumental and Economic Valuation of English

The findings reveal an overwhelming consensus on the instrumental and economic necessity of English. The highest mean scores in the survey were recorded for items related to English's role in global and academic advancement. An overwhelming majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that English is vital for Pakistan's international development, essential for academic success, necessary for obtaining high-quality jobs, and a requirement for success in modern workplaces.

These results confirm that English is perceived as the primary form of linguistic capital in Pakistan's socioeconomic marketplace, indispensable for both individual mobility and national progress.

### Status, Prestige, and Professional Image

Beyond its practical utility, English is deeply associated with social status and professional prestige. A large majority of respondents agreed that Urdu speakers fluent in English are perceived as more educated, that English proficiency enhances one's professional image, and that English carries more social prestige than Urdu.

This data illustrates a clear linguistic hierarchy where English serves as a symbolic marker of elite identity and modernization, while Urdu is positioned lower on the prestige scale.

### Identity Tension and Cultural Concerns

Despite the high valuation of English, there is significant evidence of ideological conflict regarding national identity and the cultural status of Urdu. A majority of respondents expressed concern that the widespread use of English reduces the cultural importance of Urdu, supported increasing the use of Urdu in government communications, and showed an awareness that media promotes English-centric values.

The results suggest a "double bind": while Pakistanis recognize English as essential for survival and success, they simultaneously value Urdu as a symbol of national solidarity and cultural heritage. This tension creates a sense of ambivalence.

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## **Affective Dimensions: Anxiety and Pressure**

The study highlights the significant emotional and psychological costs of navigating an unequal linguistic market. A majority of respondents admitted to feeling judged by others if they make mistakes in English, and many reported feeling pressured to speak English in academic or professional settings. A smaller proportion felt more confident in English than in Urdu, suggesting that for many, English remains a "performance" rather than a comfortable medium of expression.

These findings are indicative of linguistic insecurity, where the fear of failing to meet the "standard" creates persistent anxiety.

## **Language Policy and Prescriptive Attitudes**

Policy attitudes reflect the core contradictions in Pakistan's linguistic landscape. A majority supported teaching English from the earliest grades, reflecting a pragmatic desire to equip children with linguistic capital as early as possible. However, opinions were divided on whether English should be the medium of instruction in higher education.

The divide on this issue highlights the fundamental debate in Pakistan: whether higher education should prioritize global competitiveness or national inclusivity and pedagogical effectiveness.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **English as Dominant Linguistic Capital**

The survey results strongly support the Bourdieusian view that English functions as the dominant linguistic capital in Pakistan. The near-unanimous agreement on the instrumental value of English indicates that speakers are acutely aware of the "market price" of their linguistic choices. This capital is not just about communication; it is about the convertibility of English proficiency into economic advancement and academic credentials.

This valuation is reinforced by the "schooling divide." Students from elite private schools acquire English capital from a young age, while those in government schools often struggle to bridge the gap. The survey's demographic analysis showed that respondents with higher education levels were the strongest proponents of English's value.

### **Symbolic Violence and the Devaluation of Urdu**

The perception of English as more "prestigious" and "professional" than Urdu is a classic example of symbolic violence. When the majority of respondents agree that English fluency makes one appear "more educated," they are implicitly accepting a hierarchy that devalues Urdu and regional languages as markers of "lesser" education.

This hierarchy is enacted through "misrecognition," where the historical and political factors that made English dominant are forgotten, and its superiority is seen as an inherent quality of the language itself. The fact that Urdu is seen as culturally important but instrumentally inferior creates a "diglossic" situation where different languages are reserved for different social functions.

### **The Psychological Cost of Linguistic Hierarchy**

Perhaps the most poignant finding of this study is the level of linguistic insecurity reported by respondents. The fact that many feel "judged" for English errors and "pressured" to use it points to the psychological strain of living in a postcolonial linguistic market.

This insecurity is the personal manifestation of symbolic power. For many Urdu speakers, English is a "borrowed" capital that they must constantly work to maintain, leading to "performance anxiety" and a lack of authentic confidence. This aligns with the "linguistic cringe" documented in other studies.

## Habitus and the Naturalization of Hierarchy

Bourdieu's concept of habitus helps explain why these attitudes are so persistent despite the clear emotional costs. Younger respondents reported higher levels of anxiety and pressure than their older counterparts. This suggests that the younger generation, who are more directly exposed to the competitive, neoliberal job market, have a habitus that is even more focused on the acquisition of English capital.

The "static maintenance syndrome" is evident here: respondents value Urdu as an identity signifier but "passively assimilate" toward English for their material futures. This creates a fragmented identity where the "public" self is English-oriented and "modern," while the "private" self remains Urdu-oriented.

## CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated that language attitudes in Pakistan are shaped by a rigid hierarchy that privileges English as the ultimate form of linguistic capital. While Urdu remains a vital symbol of national identity and solidarity, its symbolic value is frequently overshadowed by the instrumental and prestige-based dominance of English. This hierarchy is not neutral; it functions as a mechanism of symbolic violence that reproduces social inequalities and fosters widespread linguistic insecurity and anxiety.

The findings suggest several key conclusions:

1. **Instrumental Dominance:** English is viewed as indispensable for socioeconomic survival and global mobility.
2. **Ideological Tension:** There is a profound conflict between the "market value" of English and the "identity value" of Urdu.
3. **Linguistic Insecurity:** The dominance of English imposes a significant psychological cost.
4. **Institutional Reproduction:** The education system and professional marketplace continue to naturalize these hierarchies.

The implications for language planning are significant. If Pakistan is to move toward a more equitable society, policy must address not just the "medium of instruction" but the underlying "ideologies of value" that marginalize non-English speakers. This requires moving beyond a binary choice between English and Urdu and creating space for the legitimate use of all of Pakistan's languages in formal, high-stakes domains.

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