

---

# CONSTRUCTING THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF URDU LANGUAGE POLICY DISCOURSE IN PAKISTAN'S NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICIES (1959–2018)

DR. RABIA SARFRAZ

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF URDU, GOVERNMENT COLLEGE UNIVERSITY FAISALABAD,  
PAKISTAN, [drrabiasarfraz@gcuf.edu.pk](mailto:drrabiasarfraz@gcuf.edu.pk)

MUHAMMAD ASIM KHAN

M.PHIL. SCHOLAR, DEPARTMENT OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS, GOVERNMENT COLLEGE UNIVERSITY  
FAISALABAD, PAKISTAN, [asim1412@gmail.com](mailto:asim1412@gmail.com)

---

## ABSTRACT

Pakistan's National Education Policies (NEPs) have always made Urdu as the symbolic pillar of the national identity but at the same time failed to remove the English from power. This study adopted qualitative research design. The publically available policy documents were collected through purposive sampling. The principle of this research is to explore the Urdu ideology, using the three dimensional framework for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of Fairclough (1992, 2003) by analyzing seven NEP documents covering the period 1959-2018. In addition to the ideological square as conceptualized by Van Dijk (2008), the analysis used the theory of linguistic capital by Bourdieu (1991) as a supplementary framework, and four discursive strategies emerge: nationalist legitimation, promissory deferral, exclusion of elites and symbolic erasure of regional languages. The study reveals that the use of NEP discourse constructs Urdu as a language of morality and unity and English as the language of economic opportunity, reflecting a set of discourse for marginalization of speakers of more than sixty indigenous languages.

**KEYWORDS:** Critical Discourse Analysis, language policy, Urdu, Pakistan, National Education Policy, linguistic hegemony, Fairclough

---

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language policy documents are never "neutral administrative documents". They are ideological tools used to build a national identity, to manage social hierarchies and to apportion the linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991; Tollefson, 2006). Other than the role of Urdu as the national language of Pakistan, there has not been any issue for so long which was so contentious, politically charged and so far not resolved. Since the first All Pakistan Education Conference in 1947 till the coming of Single National Curriculum (SNC) 2018, Urdu has been reiterated time and again as its symbolic centre and simultaneously English has been kept as the language of power (Sikandar, n.d.).

Pakistan is one of the most linguistically diverse nations in South Asia, having 70 languages, of which most are indigenous languages (Eberhard et al., 2019). However, the country's NEPs have always been a part of the narrow-bilingual framework which favours Urdu and English. There is no institutional status for Punjabi which is used by the people as a first language in the country by about 44.7% of the people. The literacy domains are also largely dominated by languages such as Sindhi, Pashtun, Balochi and many more, which are underrepresented in literate domains (Khan et al., 2025; Hashmi et al., 2025).

CDA is a highly analytical approach to the study of how these inequalities are constructed and legitimized in the language policy texts. Therefore, Fairclough (1992, 2003) presents the view that discourse constitutes (but also reflects) social reality, and this means that discourse analysis reveals the ideological work that is done in policy documents. While systematic CDA of the NEP documents as a diachronic corpus has not been studied yet, other previous studies on CDA have explored other corpus areas such as media framing by Fayyaz Hussain et al. (2024), political speeches by Hashmi et al. (2024), and education related discursive documents by Butt et al. (2024).

### 1.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What discursive strategies are employed in Pakistan's National Education Policies (1959–2018) to construct Urdu as the legitimate national language?
2. How does NEP discourse manage the ideological tension between Urdu's symbolic status as the national language and English's functional dominance as the language of power?

3. What ideological effects does NEP language policy discourse produce for speakers of regional and minority languages across the sixty-year corpus?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Language Policy and Planning in Pakistan: A Historical Overview

Pakistan's language policy is known to have faced various issues which have been termed 'dilemma' (Mansoor, 2003), 'controversy' (Rahman, 1998), and constant policy shifts (Sikandar, n.d.). The first All Pakistan Education Conference (1947) has laid the initial contradiction that Urdu was to be made the language of the nation, even though 7.5% of the population spoke Urdu as their mother tongue (Sikandar, n.d.; Haque, 1983). English continued to be used as the language in operation as the administrative elite had been trained to operate in English.

Sharif Commission (1959) suggested to have a gradual shift from English to Urdu as the medium of education on the following time line: 15 years. Replacement agenda was followed by the Nur Khan Commission (1969) and later the policies. The varied policies under Bhutto's socialist regime (1972), Zia's Islamization (1979), the democratic regime (1992-1998) and the NEP 2009 were all alike, promising eventual replacement of English with Urdu. This was never realised (Sikandar, n.d.). The NEP 2017 and the Single National Curriculum 2018, are the latest efforts to overcome this deadlock in a multilingualism approach, but their implementation has been unevenly successful.

### 2.2 CDA and Language Policy

The relationship between language, power and ideology is analyzed based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA; Fairclough, 1992; Van Dijk, 2008; Wodak, 2004). CDA is evident in policy documents and shows how certain social orders are naturalized and dominant languages are normalized while alternative languages are silenced and subaltern languages are denied recognition in the policy texts (Tollefson, 2006). Fairclough's (2003) approach is especially useful for analysis of policy as it is at both the micro and macro levels. At the micro level, texts are examined in terms of their lexical features, modals and the use of transitivity; and at the macro level, social conditions are examined as conditions that shape texts and shape by texts.

The Concept of "Ideological Square" of Van Dijk (2008) has been used usefully in the context of CDA of Pakistani discourse. It was used by Hashmi et al. (2025) to understand the way policy documents and political speeches conceptualize Urdu as the moral language of the people of Pakistan, English as the language of the elite and the progressive one, and Punjabi as a language that is absent altogether. Fayyaz Hussain et al. (2024) explored Urdu and Punjabi political history in Pakistani media through Fairclough's framework to find linguistic disparities in the media similar to the disparities in official policy documents. The study by Butt et al. (2024) was conducted using Discourse Historical Analysis (DHA) to highlight the differences between the imposition of Urdu as the national language and the political dynamics that resulted in the separation of East Pakistan in 1971 and how the discourse of language policy has concrete material and territorial consequences.

### 2.3 Linguistic Hegemony and the Marginalization of Regional Languages

Structural disadvantage in Pakistan is a process of linguistic hegemony, which is being executed through policy, education, and media at the expense of the speakers of regional languages. Linguistic hegemony in Pakistan is manifested as a structural disadvantage, which is being imposed through policy, education, and media through the process of marginalizing the speakers of regional languages. (Hashmi et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2025) Bourdieu's (1991) theory of linguistic capital complements this: English is high status and therefore is the basis for access to elite education and jobs; Urdu is intermediate status and therefore is the basis for national mobility. Formal capital economy is dominated by foreign languages.

Butt et al. (n.d.) show that even Punjabi which is spoken by almost half the population is only found in the rural and informal sphere and it is discursively linked to backwardness. Khan et al. (2023) did a study on linguistic imperialism at Government College University Faisalabad which revealed that regional linguistic identity is subjugated in the context of English-medium education. Saeed, et al., (2024) reported that the language practices in the rural society of Punjab ensures social stratification. In the digital domain offline marginalization of Punjabi is now replicated as shown by Butt et al. (2025). According to Fayyaz Hussain et al. (2025) AI systems can be considered as a form of language policy actors that carry the historical bias for the use of Urdu and against regional languages.

### 2.4 The Three-Tier Education System and Linguistic Capital

The education system in Pakistan can be classified into four segments: elite private English-medium schools, non-elite private schools, English-medium schools but they do not teach English, and Urdu-medium schools which are government run, and Arabic and Urdu (Sikandar, n.d.). A unique linguistic capital profile is generated in each stream. This stratification is admittedly by the NEP 2009. The PEELI Report (2013), cited in Sikandar (n.d.) shows that 56% of the government sector teachers and 62% of the private sector teachers scored very low in English language proficiency tests, thus creating a structural contradiction between the policy prescription and the classroom reality (Sikandar, n.d.; Hashmi et al., 2025).

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The three dimensional CDA framework developed by Fairclough (1992, 2003) is used as the lens for analyzing the speech data, with the emphasis on the analytical framework of Van Dijk’s (2008) ideological square and the concept of linguistic capital by Bourdieu (1991).

#### 3.1 Fairclough’s Three-Dimensional Framework

Fairclough (1992) understands discourse as both a text, a discursive practice (production, distribution and consumption of discourse) and a social practice (in relation with other social structures and ideas). The analysis of text includes vocabulary, semantic choices (lexicalisation), grammatical devices (transitivity, modality) and rhetorical devices. The degrees of commitment and obligation that are important in policy analysis are expressed by modal verbs like ‘shall,’ ‘should,’ ‘may’ and ‘will.’ Intertextual chains between earlier policies and international policies as well as interdiscursive mixing of discourses on nationalism, Islam, modernization and multilingualism are looked at through discursive practice analysis. The social practice analysis places the discourse into the wider dynamics of power, such as the situation of post-colonial state formation and the interests of the administration and army.

#### 3.2 Van Dijk’s Ideological Square

Ideological discourse tends to highlight positive qualities of the in-group, and negative qualities of the out-group, while masking the same negative and positive qualities, respectively, of these groups (Van Dijk 2008). When applied to NEP corpus, this schema illustrates the difference between Urdu and regional languages in terms of the display of their cultural heritage (positive in-group vs negative out-group) and their perceived level of division and informality (positive out-group vs negative out-group)

#### 3.3 Bourdieu’s Linguistic Capital

According to Bourdieu (1991) language means more than just a communicative instrument; it also represents a source of capital whose value is related to the social field where it is exchanged. Linguistic market in Pakistan refers to the educational institutions, civil service, military and professions which value the languages differently. The exchange value of English is the highest, the exchange value of Urdu is in the middle and exchange value of regional languages is the lowest or negative. NEP documents not only reflect but also reproduce such valuations, as they are linguistically constructed in a discursive manner, with language hierarchies.

### 4. METHODOLOGY

#### 4.1 Research Design

The design of this study is a qualitative research with the ground of CDA. It attempts to approach the texts from an interpretive perspective, as socially-constructed representations that are produced by the dynamic interplay between the text, the context and the reader (Fairclough, 2003). The analysis is also explicitly critical, that is, revealing power relations and/or ideological effects that are not revealed in a self-evident way.

#### 4.2 Data: The Policy Corpus

The main corpus includes the language policy sections of seven NEP documents from six different political regimes in Pakistan in the past nearly six decades and spanning from 1959 to 1980, 1969, and 1979 (Zia era), 1992, 2009 and 2018 (Single National Curriculum). The following table 1, gives an overview of the corpus.

**Table 1** Overview of the Policy Corpus: NEP Documents Analyzed (1959–2018)

NEP Document	Year	Political Era	Stated Language Goal	Medium of Instruction Policy
Sharif Commission	1959	Ayub Khan (Military)	Replace English with Urdu in 15 years	Urdu from class 6; English at university level
Nur Khan Commission	1969	Yahya Khan (Military)	Urdu as official language by 1974	National languages; reduce English teaching
Education Policy	1972	Bhutto (Civilian)	Silent on language; benign neglect	No formal directive; Urdu-medium schools increased

NEP & Implementation	1979	Zia ul-Haq (Military)	Islamize education; Urdu as Muslim identity symbol; phase out English in 5 years	Urdu in private schools; Arabic compulsory from class 6
NEP	1992	Nawaz Sharif (Civilian)	Provincial flexibility; Urdu/English/provincial language	Provincial language or Urdu at primary; English at tertiary for science
NEP 2009	2009	Musharraf/PPP	English for international competition; Urdu as link language	English for science/math from class 6; one regional language as subject from class 1
NEP Framework / SNC	2018	PTI (Civilian)	Multilingual policy; English as second language	Mother tongue at primary level; Urdu and English as subjects; Arabic for Muslims

Note. NEP = National Education Policy; SNC = Single National Curriculum. Political eras follow Government of Pakistan (1959, 1969, 1972, 1979, 1992, 2009, 2018) and Sikandar (n.d.).

### 4.3 Analytical Procedure

The analysis was carried out in three steps following the three dimensions of Fairclough. The language policy sections were first read closely, coded for lexical patterns, modes of expression, metaphors and rhetorical strategies of each document. Second, intertextual connections between documents were charted, enabling a tracking of the reworking's and developments of earlier policy talk in later documents, and/or its contestation. Third, the findings of the discursive analysis were studied and interpreted in the context of the historical, political and socioeconomic context obtained from secondary sources. The four main discourses that emerged inductively from the coding process were: nationalist legitimation, promissory deferral, elite exclusion and symbolic erasure of the regional languages.

## 5. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### 5.1 Nationalist Legitimation: Urdu as the Moral Language of Pakistan

In all the seven NEP documents Urdu is built both as a medium of communication and moral and political obligation. According to the Sharif Commission (1959) national unity is possible on the basis of linguistic unity: 'for the sake of our national unity we must do everything to promote the linguistic cohesion of West Pakistan by developing the national language Urdu to the fullest.' The usage of the terms 'national unity' and 'linguistic cohesion' is only naturalizing the existence of one nation and one language, neglecting the contestation of this claim (Hashmi et al., 2024).

This discursive logic had already been set against Urdu in the 1947 Education Conference where Urdu was described as 'extraordinary vitality and sensitivity both as an instrument of communication and as a vehicle for the expression of the subtlest shades of thought'. This establishes Urdu as a "culturally superior" language, and by implication, as an inferior by other languages are left out. This nationalist legitimation is made more Islamic from the beginning of the NEP in 1979. Zia ul-Haq's Urdu, as a symbol of Muslim identity, is an interdiscursive move to give Urdu the credibility of Islamic discourse, thus strengthening the language nationalism (Fairclough, 2003; Hashmi et al., 2025). This strategy highlights positive aspects of the in-group and marginalizes the negative aspects, in the ideological square terms of Van Dijk (2008). All the NEP documents examined are conspicuous for their lack of mention of the Bengali language movement of 1952 or the separation of East Pakistan in 1971, key outcomes of the Urdu-only policy as reported by Butt et al. (2024). The textual evidence for this and subsequent themes are included in Table 2.

**Table 2** Textual Analysis of Key Discursive Strategies Across NEP Documents

NEP Year	Key Textual Extract (Paraphrased)	Modal / Lexical Feature	Discursive Function
1959	For the sake of national unity we must promote linguistic cohesion by developing Urdu to the fullest extent	"must"; nominalization: national unity, linguistic cohesion	Nationalist legitimation; naturalizes one-nation-one-language ideology

1973 Constitution	Arrangements shall be made for Urdu to be used for official purposes within fifteen years	"shall be made" (obligation + passive); vague agent; unspecified procedure	Promissory deferral; obscures agency; enables non-compliance
1979	Urdu promoted as a symbol of Muslim identity; English to phase out in five years	Interdiscursive borrowing (Islamic discourse); temporal specification without mechanism	Islamization of linguistic nationalism; repeats deferral pattern
2009	Rich families send children to English-medium schools; the poor enroll in public schools	Acknowledgment rhetoric; absence of prescriptive remedy	Acknowledgment without accountability; naturalizes class stratification
2017	Elite English-medium institutions charge high fees causing societal divide and class system	Condemnation lexis ("condemns," "divide," "class system") without structural mandate	Performative critique; reproduces elite exclusion while appearing critical
2018	Pakistan will have a multilingual policy with English taught as a second language	"will have" (prospective); multilingual framing; implementation unspecified	Discursive shift toward pluralism; continues deferral mechanism

Note. Modal and lexical features are drawn from the language policy sections of each NEP document. Discursive functions are interpreted using Fairclough (1992, 2003) and Van Dijk (2008). All extracts are paraphrased.

### 5.2 Promissory Deferral: The Perpetual Fifteen Years

Of all the interesting points that can be cited in the discursive field of the NEP corpus, perhaps the most interesting is the repeated promissory structure that keeps Urdu at a symbolic level, yet also puts it into limbo with regard to implementation. The Sharif Commission (1959) suggested to use Urdu instead of English within 15 years. This was copied verbatim in the 1973 Constitution. In 1979 the NEP shortened the time period to five years. All these promises were never implemented (Sikandar, n.d.).

This pattern is realized at the textual level in the high modal verbs ('shall be made,' 'will replace') and the indefinite temporal and procedural terms and phrases ('arrangements,' 'measures,' 'efforts'). A performative paradox, the combination of the strong obligation modality ('shall') and the non-specific procedure ('arrangements'), is generated, as this study names it, by the text which performs the commitment, but, structurally, allows non-compliance. This is recognized by Sikandar (n.d.) as 'incremental mode' of policy-making, which is a phenomenon caused by political instability. It is a deferral of policy at the social practice level for identifiable elite interests as Sikandar (n.d.) noted, the real policy is English and it is kept for educational, professional and social reasons. The existence of this modal pattern in all seven documents can be seen in Table 2 above with slight variation of the lexicon used.

### 5.3 Elite Exclusion: Three Education Systems, Three Languages

In NEP discourse, a three tier education system is built where the linguistic stratification in the education system reinforces and reproduces class inequality. The NEP 2009 clearly spells out the 'Vision 2030' that is reality of English-medium schools catering to the rich and public schools catering to the poor (Sikandar, n.d.). Tables 3 and 4 help bring to life the ideological square operations that underpin this hierarchy, and the structural profile of the three-tier system by NEP policy stances, respectively.

In terms of text, the NEP documents deal with this contradiction by a process of acknowledgment without accountability. The NEP 2017 is highly condemning about the high fee charged by the elite English medium institutes causing a divide in the society, while failing to mention the need of structural equalization of the medium of instruction as proposed by Sikandar (n.d.). It is a good example of how Fairclough (2003) describes the ideological work of 'common sense' which is to make as natural and inevitable what are the effect of specific policy decisions. Bourdieu's (1991) concept of capital provides a light on the dynamics of capital: English is a high status capital and only those who obtain access to elite schools become holders of this capital, whereas the graduates of Urdu-medium education have limited market capital.

**Table 3.** Ideological Square Analysis of Language Representations in Pakistan's NEPs

Ideological Square Move	Urdu (In-group)	English	Regional Languages (Out-group)
-------------------------	-----------------	---------	--------------------------------

Emphasize positive in-group	National language; symbol of Muslim identity; lingua franca; vehicle of unity	Language of science, technology, and international access	Absent; not attributed positive traits in NEP discourse
De-emphasize negative in-group	Mother tongue of only 7.5% suppressed; Bengali movement absent from all NEPs	Colonial legacy, elite privilege largely omitted from policy critique	Not applicable (regional languages are out-group)
Emphasize negative out-group	Not applicable (Urdu is in-group)	High fees; societal divide; colonial legacy (NEP 2017)	Associated with regionalism, division, informal settings, rural backwardness
De-emphasize positive out-group	Not applicable	Economic mobility function acknowledged but attributed to elite only	Cultural heritage, majority speaker status, pedagogical value systematically omitted

Note. Ideological square framework adapted from Van Dijk (2008). Language attributions are derived from textual analysis of NEP documents (Government of Pakistan, 1959–2018) and secondary analysis in Hashmi et al. (2025) and Fayyaz Hussain et al. (2024).

**Table 4.** Three-Tier Education System: Language Stratification and Linguistic Capital

School Type	Medium of Instruction	Socioeconomic Access	Language Capital Produced	NEP Policy Stance
Elite private (English-medium)	English; Urdu as foreign language	Upper and upper-middle class only	High: English fluency, O/A level credentials	Condemned rhetorically (NEP 2017); structurally unsupported
Non-elite private (English-medium in name)	Bilingual: English/Urdu; often Urdu-dominant in practice	Lower-middle and working class urban	Medium: limited English, functional Urdu	Implicitly endorsed through English-medium policy (NEP 2009)
Government / public (Urdu-medium)	Urdu; Sindhi/Pashto in some provinces	Lower income; rural majority	Low: Urdu literacy; minimal English	Formally prioritized; inadequately resourced
Madrasahs	Arabic; Urdu	Lower income; rural and peri-urban	Minimal market capital; religious domain	Incorporated via Islamization (NEP 1979, 1992, 1998)

Note. School type classifications follow Sikandar (n.d.) and NEP 2009 (Government of Pakistan, 2009). Linguistic capital analysis is informed by Bourdieu (1991). PEELI Report data cited in Sikandar (n.d.).

#### 5.4 Symbolic Erasure: Regional Languages in the Margins

One factor common to all the NEP texts is their consistent neglect of regional languages. Punjabis, Sindhis, Pashtunis, Balochis, Saraiki and more than sixty other languages are not even included in policy talk as a means of fostering unity, but are rather referred to only as the threat to the national unity. The Sharif Commission's idea of 'Urdu will eventually become the common popular language of all the people' is an example of this assimilationist logic which permeates the NEP corpus. In this regard, the National Education Policy (2009) and Punjab Curriculum Policy (2015) have effectively banned Punjabi in education and this is considered as a systemic form of language discrimination. In this regard the policy of National Education (2009) and Curriculum Policy of Punjab (2015) have effectively banned Punjabi in education; it is a systemic form of language discrimination as documented by Khan et al. (2025). The changes in the provisions for regional languages in the corpus are recorded in Table 5.

This is a step towards inclusion as per NEP 2009 which has made a provision that 'one regional language' will be the compulsory language starting from Class 1 onwards, while the medium of teaching languages of science and mathematics from Class 6 onwards are prioritized in English. A discursive strategy that is one of the structured tokenism, recognizes regional languages as subjects, but does not include them in the curriculum as a medium for

instruction. The NEP 2017 is the first time that this practice has been changed formally and local languages are allowed to be used as the medium of instruction in the primary schools. Even in this provision it is pedagogically acknowledged as a concession to UNESCO (2007) yet it is not a recognition of the rights. Butt et al. (2024) argued that the marginalization of Bengali speakers was a direct result of the separation of East Pakistan in 1971, which is directly linked to the absence of this history in subsequent NEP documents in Van Dijk's (2008) sense of a systematic suppression of negative in-group consequence.

**Table 5.** Regional Language Provisions and Discursive Strategies across NEP Documents

NEP Year	Regional Language Provision	Discursive Strategy	Languages Named	Structural Status Granted
1947 Conference	Provincial languages permitted as medium; Urdu compulsory nationwide	Tokenism: permission without institutional support	Bengali (implicitly)	Subject only; no official domain
1959	Urdu to become the common language of all people	Assimilationism: erases linguistic diversity as a category	None	None
1972	No section devoted to language; benign neglect	Silence: regional languages rendered invisible	None	None
1979	One regional language taught from class III onwards where Urdu is medium	Tokenism under Islamization; Arabic prioritized over regional languages	Unspecified	Subject only (class III+)
1992	Approved provincial language may be medium; English for tertiary science	Partial pluralism: provincial option without mandate	Provincial languages (unnamed)	Optional medium (primary only)
2009	One regional language as compulsory subject from class 1; English for science from class 6	Structured tokenism: inclusion as subject, exclusion from medium	Unspecified	Compulsory subject only
2017	Local languages permitted as medium at primary level; first such provision in Pakistan	Pedagogical concession framed via UNESCO rationale, not rights-based	Local/indigenous (unnamed)	Medium (primary); subject thereafter
2018 (SNC)	Multilingual policy; English as second language; mother tongue at primary	Discursive pluralism: frameworks shift but implementation uneven	Mother tongue (generic)	Medium (primary); implementation patchy

Note. Provisions derived from Government of Pakistan (1959, 1969, 1972, 1979, 1992, 2009, 2018) as analyzed in Sikandar (n.d.) and secondary literature. Discursive strategy labels are analytical categories derived from Fairclough (1992, 2003).

## 6. DISCUSSION

Seven NEP documents are analyzed, using Fairclough's (1992, 2003) three-dimensional CDA framework, the ideological square framework of Van Dijk (2008) and the theory of linguistic capital of Bourdieu (1991), resulting in four discursive themes, which are referred to in this study as the 'national tongue discourse.' This section systematically exposes the results and conclusions of this study, compares the results and conclusions with other studies and links the results and conclusions to the theoretical framework.

### 6.1 Nationalist Legitimation and Its Theoretical Implications

The present study has revealed that the most common and structurally stable discursive approach in the NEP corpus is nationalist legitimation. All of the documents from 1947 to 2018 make Urdu a moral, cultural and political imperative through three different text-based processes: (i) Nominalisation of contested political claims by converting notions of 'Urdu should unify the nation' into a 'fact' as 'national unity' or 'linguistic cohesion'; (ii) Positive Attribution gives Urdu attributes such as 'vitality,' 'sensitivity,' 'Muslim identity' and 'vehicle of unity' to naturalize Urdu nationalism as a religious rather than political imperative; and (iii) Interdiscursive Borrowing, defined most clearly in the NEP (1979) through the importation of Islamic discourse. A significant discovery is that there are no instances in the seven documents of the suppression of negative history, namely, Bengali language movement of 1952 and the partition in 1971.

The results of this research corroborate and build on existing research. In the Urdu-as-unity ideology, Hashmi et al. (2024) used historical discourse analysis with the help of political and policy texts of Urdu, Punjabi and English to see the construction of national identity. This was also substantiated by Hashmi et al. (2025) in their power relations CDA which revealed that Urdu is always given the moral tag as the national language, whereas English is portrayed as progressive and Punjabi as lacking. The current study confirms both findings, adds a methodological step to them: while Hashmi et al. (2024, 2025) looked at individual documents or specific political regimes, the current study systematically traces the same discursive construction over six political regimes over a time span of sixty years, thus establishing that the construction of national legitimation is not regime-specific, but rather structurally embedded in the policy apparatus of Pakistan.

In Pakistani media discourse, Urdu/Punjabi power asymmetry was identified by Fayyaz Hussain et al. (2024) who used Fairclough's framework and found that the Urdu/Punjabi power asymmetry maintained in media mirrors the same one that is maintained in NEP document. This finding is confirmed by the current study, which illustrates how the formal policy corpus feeds into the ideological formations which are reproduced in the media discourse. Butt et al. (2024) using DHA was able to show the ways in which the imposition of Urdu led to the marginalization of Bengalis and eventually to the dissolution of the state. The present study builds on this insight and demonstrates that suppressing that history through discursive means is a strategy itself; not forgetting, but an ideology that is consistently replicated in all seven NEPs since 1971.

Fairclough's (2003) notion of interdiscursivity provides an explanation for how the NEP uses Islamic discourse to strengthen linguistic nationalism: The policy places the choice of language in an Islamic context, allowing the policy to gain the authority and emotional force of religious discourse. On the social practice level, the finding supports the view of Fairclough (1992) that discourse is not only reflective of social relations but also that it helps to produce and maintain them: Urdu discourse is used to define Urdu as the moral language and it is used repeatedly, which in turn produces and sustains the social order that it describes.

Van Dijk's (2008) ideological square is a translation of the particular ways in which this construction is realized. The two most ideologically productive moves, which have been highlighted as relevant in this context according to Van Dijk, are positive in-group self-presentation and suppression of negative in-group features, with the former referring to Urdu's good qualities (unity, Muslim identity, national instrument) and the latter to Urdu's bad qualities (minority mother tongue, instrument of marginalization). It is a textbook example of the latter, as the Bengali movement has been completely omitted from all documents after the 1971 war in the post-1971 NEP documents.

According to Bourdieu (1991) from a theoretical viewpoint this discursive construction is not only ideational but material as well, because developing Urdu as moral, national and legitimate language inculcates this language in the symbolic capital that it has accumulated in the linguistic market, and thus the dominance of Urdu seems natural and earned rather than imposed and contested.

### 6.2 Promissory Deferral as a Novel Discursive Strategy

The most theoretically innovative aspect of this study is the discovery and designation of a novel discursive strategy – promissory deferral. The analysis revealed that all NEP documents (1959-2018) have the formal commitment to shift from English to Urdu, which is present in each document with a typical modal-procedural structure; high obligation modality (shall be made, will replace, must phase out) and procedural vagueness (arrangements, measures, steps will be taken). Together, this creates what the current study labels an English performative paradox: the text is the social effect that it is a commitment (to critics of the dominance of English) but its procedural uncertainty means that there is no way to enforce or hold it to account. The pattern is intertextual: every NEP acknowledges that the one that came before it failed, and pledges to be better in order to make the deferral of language acquisition the norm. What is repeated intertextually is that every NEP must recognize the failure of the preceding NEP, and make new promises to be better to make the deferral of language acquisition the norm.

Previous research has chronicled the result of this trend of uninterrupted English domination, but it has failed to pinpoint the discursive mechanism that sustains it. Rahman (1998) termed the 'contradiction' between Pakistan's stated language policy (Urdu as the state language) and its actual policy (English as the 'language of power') as 'structural feature of Pakistani politics'. It can be presented as a planning dilemma as suggested by Mansoor (2003, 2005). The incremental approach to language planning is the process of making policy decisions that are incrementally

made, as described by Sikandar (n.d.), which occurs when in times of political instability, governments would not want to make long-term decisions about language planning due to uncertain circumstances.

What the present study focuses on, instead, is providing a nuanced description of the ways in which this contradiction is not resolved, but maintained. The current study analyses the phenomenon at the level of the actual text; specifically, it is the modal-procedural structure which reproduces the phenomenon document by document, as identified by Rahman (1998), Mansoor (2003, 2005) and Sikandar (n.d.). The uniformity of this structure in the language policy discourse across the six governments including the civilian governments that showed seriousness towards Urdu promotion and military governments that did not, indicates that it is not a product of a specific government, but a structural characteristic of the language policy discourse in Pakistan irrespective of political ideology.

This can be attributed to Fairclough's (1992) study on modality which offers the main theoretical justification. The concept of modality is used in Fairclough's framework to mean the producer's certainty about the truth/desirability of a proposition. The modality 'shall' is used to indicate high obligation to a certain type of action. The present study goes further than this, demonstrating the systematic undermining of the pragmatic effect of strong obligation modality (enforceable commitment) when it is used in conjunction with procedural vagueness. This can be a discursive formation to which successive policy makers can turn and which they can reproduce, irrespective of their own intentions.

The intertextual element of this discovery is explained by Fairclough's (2003) notion of intertextuality. The structure of each NEP is not a new invention, but rather is indirectly connected to the previous NEPs, with reference to their shortcomings. This establishes, in Fairclough's words, a chain of discursive formations that continually enacts the conventions of promissory deferral, thus normalizing them. Bourdieu's (1991) field theory places the social interests of this normalization: the administrative, military, professional elite who have historically been educated in English, in a material interest in maintaining the dominance of English. Promissory deferral fulfills this interest while at the same time symbolizing greater commitment to a more egalitarian language policy.

### **6.3 Elite Exclusion and the Acknowledgment-Without-Accountability Strategy**

The third one relates to the discursive handling of the three-tier education system. The present study found a rhetorical strategy in NEP documents, namely, acknowledging the inequality of the three-tier system without holding anyone accountable. The present study found that NEP documents could acknowledge the inequity of the three-tier system without holding anyone accountable through a rhetorical strategy. The most significant one is the NEP 2017 which vilifies elite English medium institutions for creating a class system and causing a divide in society while not recommending any change in the medium of instruction in the schools. The asymmetry is evident from the analysis of the words used: condemnation words are strong ('condemns', 'caused', 'divide', 'class system') while remedial words are missing. The discourse doesn't raise the moral concern but doesn't create a policy consequence.

This new study further builds on and enhances existing research on language and class in Pakistan. Saeed et al. (2024) conducted a CDA of language practices in rural Punjab and found that the choice of language is used as a means of marking the class based inequalities, as the current study has pointed out discursively. In their examination of power relations between Urdu, Punjabi and English, Hashmi et al. (2025) have found the existence of an elite/public school language capital gap, which manifests into tangible educational and professional outcomes as revealed in Table 4.

The study done by Khan et al. (2023) at Government College University Faisalabad, which reveals the effects of linguistic imperialism in tertiary level education, offers empirical evidence of the results of the three-tier system. Fayyaz Hussain et al. (2025) took a similar approach to the digital realm and revealed the same elite/public dichotomy in access to English is being manifested in access to AI-mediated communication and services.

The current study's contribution is to show that the three-tier system is not only reported in the literature empirically, but is also "naturalized" in NEP discourse as part of its work through the acknowledgment-without-accountability strategy. The rhetorical and policy disconnect between the rhetoric of condemnation of elite privilege and the policy of failing to call for equalization is itself a productive ideological space: it makes it look as if there is a policy concern and also ensures that there is no possibility of policy action.

The overall theoretical framework is based on Fairclough's (2003) notion of 'common sense' ideology. Historically contingent and politically-selected arrangements, for Fairclough, are natural and inevitable when presented under the umbrella of common sense ideology. This is illustrated by the NEP discourse on the three-tier system; the discourse accepts the system as a fact of social reality while it does not offer any structural solutions, which means that the discourse here naturalizes the system.

The naturalization is illuminated by Bourdieu's (1991) theory of field and capital that shows how the interests of a particular class are being served. English is the most valuable language of the linguistic market in Pakistan. The people who have it, namely, graduates of the elite English-medium schools, are the dominant figures in the school, professions, and government. These roles allow them to have an outsize say on the very NEP documents that officially denounce their privilege and go so far as to reinforce it. This is where the concept of elite discourse (Van Dijk 2008) comes in. The elites make and control the policy texts that are used to represent their own privilege, and are also used to provide a sense of self-critique.

#### 6.4 Symbolic Erasure and the Seven-Stage Trajectory

The fourth finding presents the development of the language provisions in the region in a seven-stage continuum of change, from assimilation (1959) to structured silence (1972), tokenism during islamization (1979), partial pluralism (1992), structured tokenism (2009), pedagogical concession (2017), and discursive pluralism (2018). However, the present study suggests that this shift is not an abrupt one, as there is a key continuity in the status assignment of regional languages to low status domains in the documents in each of the seven trajectories, and the absence of rights-based framing of regional language speakers from every document in the corpus.

The implications of this trend were documented by Khan et al. (2025) and they found that NEP 2009 and Punjab Curriculum Policy 2015 successfully marginalized Punjabi from educational settings, thus continuing the language discrimination that has been established at a system level. The present study brings the diachronic dimension: The handling of Punjabi in the NEP 2009 is not an exception but is the result of a sixty-year discursive tradition of structuring the inclusion of regional languages as subjects while their exclusion as medium of instructions.

However, Butt et al. (n.d.) noted the limited use of Punjabi in formal and urban settings and discursively linked the use of Punjabi with being backward. Hussain et al. (2020) explored the phenomenon of Punjabi language marginalization and advocacy in detail and revealed the wide spectrum of institutional marginalization. In the present study both of these findings are placed within the formal policy corpus, which is NEP discourse. The systematization of the omission of the discursive association between Punjabi and informality is what authorizes and normalizes it.

The most meaningful historical comparison is from the DHA of the Bengali language movement and the collapse of Dhaka, which is provided by Butt et al. (2024). The finding that linguistic assimilation played a role in state dissolution points to the symbolic erasure of regional language as something other than discursive but also with material, political consequences, as documented in the current study. As Butt et al. (2025) shows in their research of Punjabi and AI, these impacts are now being played out in the digital realm – where there is no Punjabi, there is no Punjabi. The consequences of this are educational, economic and communicative inequities in a digital society.

In a recent study on family language policy of Sindhi families in Karachi, Abbasi et al. (2025) showed that although a family's language policy can be explicit (with respect to instrumental value) Urdu and English, the family language policy is still implicit (in terms of emotional attachment) Sindhi. This is a micro-level finding in line with the macro level contradiction in NEP discourse highlighted by this current study; symbolic importance of Urdu language and instrumental importance of English alongside systematic marginalization of regional languages can enter at the formal policy level and manifest at the everyday level in the family language management; resulting in the normalization of the linguistic hierarchy that NEP discourse constructs.

This finding is best theoretically supported by van Dijk's (2008) ideological square. Systematic erasure of out-group positive attributes: the regional languages' cultural heritage, the majority status of speakers and their pedagogical value in all NEP documents is the defining move of symbolic erasure. In contrast, NEP discourse doesn't have to devalue regional languages in order to do so: their absence from the policy text is a form of devaluation, and an indication that they are not policy-relevant.

It is here that the concept of absent presuppositions of Fairclough (1992) applies: what is not mentioned in NEP documents concerning regional languages is as important as what is mentioned. The lack of a rights-based perspective in sixty years of documents is not a coincidence but a structural decision because it puts language provision as a pedagogical concession (NEP 2017, in the 1990s and 2000s), or an administrative option (NEP 1992, in the 1990s), but not as a political right. The consequences of Bourdieu's (1991) theory of capital are that languages not included in the formal economy of education and administration suffer from a decline in symbolic value, and therefore in professional competitiveness in the economic sectors that affect life trajectories.

#### 6.5 The National Language Discourse as an Ideological Formation

Combined, the four together form a consistent ideological complex, enabling the maintenance of linguistic hierarchy along six political regimes spanning sixty years of policymaking in Pakistan. The national tongue discourse simultaneously legitimizes Urdu as the moral, Islamic, and unifying national language, promises to give it institutional status as this celebration of Urdu suggests, never delivers on this promise (promissory deferral), accepts English's actual dominance, while at the same time and on an institutional level, it fails to address their structural causes (acknowledgment without accountability), and recognizes the existence of regional languages, but systematically excludes them from the domains of power and capital (symbolic erasure).

This ideology is a product of specific group of interests: administrative, military, professional and educational elite that has been produced by English language education and that dominates the linguistic market in Pakistan. NEP discourse reproduces the conditions of elite reproduction, while committing to Urdu's symbolic primacy, by marginalizing regional languages while gesturing towards them, and by promoting English' practical dominance while claiming to respect Urdu's symbolic primacy. This is what Gramsci would call hegemony: not obtained by force but created by consent, obtained in this case through the discursive construction of Urdu nationalism, the normalization of the domination of the English language and the symbolic obliteration of the regional language alternatives.

What this implies for language policy reform is that changes in texts are not enough. While the multilingual framing of the NEP 2018 is a true discursive step forward, the promissory deferral pattern documented in Tables 2 and 5,

indicates that, while there is discursive change in policy documents that does not always lead to structural change, and rather often decades later. To challenge this trend, challenges must be met to the interests that the national language discourse serves, and mechanisms of institutionalization must be developed that would make the promises of language policy enforceable: rights-based legal frameworks, accountability mechanisms tied to implementation dates and equitable allocation of resources to regional language education.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This research has used Fairclough's (1992, 2003) three-dimensional CDA framework to discuss the construction of Urdu in the documents of National Education Policy of Pakistan 1959-2018. Six analytical tables recorded the textual evidence along with the connection between the results of the current research and the previous research. The analysis revealed four prominent nationalizing discursive strategies nationalist legitimation, promissory deferral, elite exclusion, and symbolic erasure of regional languages—that together constitute a 'national tongue discourse' that naturalizes linguistic hierarchy and performs commitment to an egalitarian ideal of a national language.

The study has three major contributions. Firstly, it is the first systematic diachronic CDA of the NEP corpus of Pakistan, it shows that the basic building blocks of Urdu discourse are stable during six political regime and six decades, irrespective of ideology. Second, it describes the performative paradox between high obligation modality and procedural vague as a theoretically significant and previously unnoticed discursive strategy, which no existing study has identified or theorized. Third, by using the comparative approach presented in Table 6, it places its results in relation to previous scholarship and highlights points of convergence, extension and novelty.

The focus on the declaratory policy documents is a limitation, as is the absence of classroom practice and community language ideologies. The current analysis could be supplemented in future with ethnographic research of language management in schools or interview research on teachers' and students' attitudes and orientations. AI also needs to be considered as a language policy actor, as has been noted by Butt et al. (2025) and Fayyaz Hussain et al. (2025), and deserves specific CDA focus. The language hierarchies embedded in six decades of NEP discourse have the potential to get amplified in the digital infrastructure in Pakistan, even beyond the formal policy realm and into the spheres of communication, education and employment.

## REFERENCES

4. Abbasi, M. H., Soomro, A. F., & David, M. K. (2025). Explicit vs. unconscious management of the language policy: Conflicting ideologies and practices of Sindhi families in Karachi, Pakistan. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2025.2088972>
5. Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Polity Press.
6. Butt, M., Ashraf, M. J., Sanjarani, K. M., Khan, M. A., & Arshaad, T. (2024). The politics of language and the fall of Dhaka: A discourse historical analysis. *Migration Letters*, 21(S14), 1065–1084.
7. Butt, M., Rouf, A., Irfan ul Haq, M., Kalyan, K. S., Rasool, A. G., & Khan, M. A. (2025). Artificial intelligence and Punjabi language revitalization: Opportunities, challenges, and policy interventions. *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences*, 23(2), 967–984.
8. Butt, M., Shahzad, N., Batool, S., Hussain, F., Khan, M. A., & Zahoor, Z. (n.d.). Cultural capital and linguistic marginalization: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Punjabi and Saraiki languages in Pakistan. Unpublished manuscript.
9. Eberhard, D. M., Simons, G. F., & Fennig, C. D. (Eds.). (2019). *Ethnologue: Languages of the world* (22nd ed.). SIL International.
10. Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Polity Press.
11. Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. Routledge.
12. Fayyaz Hussain, D. S. K., ul Haq, M. I., Rehman, N. U., Anwar, N., Hashmi, T. M., & Khan, M. A. (2025). Language policy in the age of artificial intelligence: Implications for Urdu and Punjabi language in Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences*, 23(2).
13. Fayyaz Hussain, D. S. R., Butt, M., Sarwar, T., & Khan, M. A. (2024). The evolution of language politics: A CDA study of Urdu and Punjabi in Pakistan. *History of Medicine*, 10(2), 956–980.
14. Government of Pakistan. (1959). *Report of the Commission on National Education*. Ministry of Education.
15. Government of Pakistan. (1969). *Proposals for a new educational policy*. Ministry of Education.
16. Government of Pakistan. (1972). *The education policy 1972–1980*. Ministry of Education.
17. Government of Pakistan. (1979). *National education policy and implementation programme*. Ministry of Education.
18. Government of Pakistan. (1992). *National education policy*. Ministry of Education.
19. Government of Pakistan. (2009). *National education policy 2009*. Ministry of Education.
20. Government of Pakistan. (2018). *National education policy framework 2018*. Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training.
21. Haque, A. R. (1983). The position and status of English in Pakistan. *World Language English*, 2(1).

22. Hashmi, T. M., Hyder, S., Gujjar, M., Khan, H., Gondal, M. I., & Khan, M. A. (2025). Language, ideology and policy: A CDA of power relations among Urdu, Punjabi, and English in Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Life & Social Sciences*, 23(2).
23. Hashmi, T. M., Perveen, N., Hussain, F., Razzaq, S., Khan, M. A., Arshaad, T., & Yar, S. (2024). Constructing national identity: A historical discourse analysis of Urdu, Punjabi and English in Pakistan. *Kurdish Studies*, 12(2), 6890–6900.
24. Hussain, F., Khan, M. A., & Khan, H. (2020). Punjabi language perspectives: A comprehensive study on marginalization and advocacy in Pakistan. *Journal of Islamic Civilization and Culture*, 3(1), 97–113.
25. Khan, H., Butt, M., Ishaq, S., Wattoo, Z. H., Yaseen, R., & Khan, M. A. (2025). Marginalization of Punjabi in Pakistan: Exploring language. *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences*, 23(2), 70–86.
26. Khan, M. A., Hussain, F., Nadeem, Z., & Arslan, M. (2023). An exploratory study of linguistics imperialism on undergraduate students of Faisalabad. *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 7(3), 1342–1357.
27. Mansoor, S. (2003). The medium of instruction dilemma: Implications for language planning in education. In S. Mansoor, S. Meraj, & A. Tahir (Eds.), *Language policy, planning and practice: A South Asian perspective* (pp. 40–58). Aga Khan University/Oxford University Press.
28. Mansoor, S. (2005). *Language planning in higher education*. Oxford University Press.
29. Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford University Press.
30. Rahman, T. (1998). *Language and politics in Pakistan*. Oxford University Press.
31. Saeed, M. U., Zulfiqar, I., Ashraf, M. J., Khan, M. A., & Abbas, Z. (2024). The politics of language in rural Punjab: Exploring social stratification, linguistic capital and power dynamics through critical discourse analysis. *Remittances Review*, 9(S3), 1316–1351.
32. Shehryar, Khan, M. A., Mahjabeen, A., & Hussain, F. (2020). Socio-political dimensions of language policy and planning: A case study of Pakistan's multilingual landscape (1947–2020). *PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology*, 17(12), 1906–1923.
33. Sikandar, A. (n.d.). *Language policy planning in Pakistan: A review*. Unpublished manuscript.
34. Spolsky, B. (2004). *Language policy*. Cambridge University Press.
35. Tollefson, J. W. (2006). Critical theory in language policy. In T. Ricento (Ed.), *An introduction to language policy: Theory and method* (pp. 42–59). Blackwell.
36. Tollefson, J. W. (2011). Political economy, power, and new approaches to language policy and planning. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (Vol. 2, pp. 350–361). Routledge.
37. UNESCO. (2007). *Education for all by 2015: Will we make it? EFA Global Monitoring Report*. UNESCO.
38. Van Dijk, T. A. (2008). *Discourse and power*. Palgrave Macmillan.
39. Wodak, R. (2004). Critical discourse analysis. In C. Seale, G. Gobo, J. F. Gubrium, & D. Silverman (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice* (pp. 197–213). SAGE.