

# A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF URDU AS A VEHICLE OF NATIONAL COHESION, ENGLISH AS LINGUISTIC CAPITAL AND THE STRUCTURAL ERASURE OF MOTHER TONGUES IN PAKISTAN'S SINGLE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

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## ABSTRACT

The Single National Curriculum (SNC 2018-2020) is designed as initiative that unifies the educational system of Pakistan that is currently based on separate curricula for different types of schools and promotes the use of multiple languages in schools. This study critically analyzed the standardization other than equity. A qualitative research design was adopted. This study utilized the three dimension Critical Discourse Analysis framework, designed by Fairclough (1992, 2003) and an ideological square, designed by Van Dijk (2008) and a theory of linguistic capital proposed by Bourdieu (1991), on the five major SNC documents to show that the SNC refers to the three ideological operations at the same time. First it makes Urdu nationalism an implicit part of the curriculum content in textbooks to a formal part of the curriculum, by making patriotism and social cohesion as SLOs of Urdu language. Second, it enhances the symbolic and institutional status of English, transforming it from a school subject into a “communication skill”, investing in the institutionalization of assessment that is unique to English in the corpus. Third, it creates what this paper calls promissory pluralism: a new discursive category that means there is a gap between the policy communication and enactment of SLOs, and none at all for any of Pakistan's seventy-plus indigenous languages in 79 pages of the General Knowledge curriculum. The study contributes to audit the SNC's primary curriculum document on the SLO level and it brings in a theoretically concept of promissory pluralism, which is distinct from the earlier instances of NEPs' promissory deferral; and it shows that the SNC's universalization pushes further into Pakistan's language hierarchy after 1947.

**KEYWORDS:** Single National Curriculum, Critical Discourse Analysis, linguistic capital, Urdu, mother tongue, promissory pluralism, Pakistan, language policy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Single National Curriculum (SNC) has an explicit promise that a single curriculum would be implemented for all children, irrespective of the type of educational institution they attend; elite private school in Lahore, government school in the village of Sindh, Deeni Madrassa in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Government of Pakistan, 2018; Haider, 2022). It's a declaration of educational equality disguised as uniformity of the curriculum. The promise is received through a discursive architecture which creates the illusion of equity and restores the linguistic hierarchy that has been in place since 1947 in the Pakistani education system.

The SNC's language architecture is comprised of three moves that interweave. The formal embedding of patriotic legitimation, citizenship and social cohesion as language curriculum competencies in Urdu is the process of moral and civic construction of Pakistani nationhood, which moves from implicit to explicit. English is given a new status as a communicative competence, not as a school subject anymore, but as a linguistic capital as it is invested in a special infrastructure of assessment, thus enriching its value as a linguistic capital in Bourdieu's (1991) definition. The 100% of the primary school children of Pakistan speak mother tongues which are structural silenced, not through marginalization in the words but through their absence, with no Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) for any region or indigenous language throughout the entire foundational curriculum.

There are more than seventy living languages in Pakistan with Punjabi being the mother tongue of around 49% of the population of Pakistan (Hussain et al., 2020). These children enter the recent unified education system of SNC as first language speakers of Sindh, Pashto, Balochi, Saraiki and scores of other languages. Among other things, SNC's

Salient Features explicitly states that diversity of culture and languages, particularly regional languages of Pakistan, will be encouraged via Urdu curriculum. In the SNC's General Knowledge curriculum for Grades I-III (the foundational curriculum for primary language socialization) there are no SLO, benchmark, standard or teacher guidance notes about any of these languages and 79 pages. This is the space which the current paper tries to study. Language ideology has already been explored in the context of the National Education Policies (NEP) of Pakistan by scholars of the scholarship of the discipline (CDA) such as Hashmi et al., 2024, 2025; Butt et al., 2024; and political discourses (Rahman, 1998, 2002), and individual SNC textbooks (Tayyab et al., 2022; Numan & Ayaz, 2023). No CDA of the SNC's enacted curriculum has been carried out, systematically across documents, at the SLO level; no study theorises the specific discursive mechanism which makes the SNC's pluralism claims, both, and has been explored. The objectives of this paper were to address both these gaps.

### 1.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

There are three research questions on which the inquiry is organized:

1. How does the SNC discursively construct Urdu as the language of national cohesion and moral citizenship, and what textual mechanisms produce this construction at the SLO level?
2. How does the SNC deepen the institutional value of English as linguistic capital while framing this deepening as pedagogical modernization rather than class privilege?
3. What is the discursive mechanism by which the SNC simultaneously claims to promote regional language diversity and enacts zero provisions for regional languages in its primary curriculum SLOs?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 The SNC: Between Uniformity and Ideology

The SNC was launched in 2018 by the government of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf with the intention of eradicating class-based stratification and making Pakistan's education system in line with SDG 4, "Education for All" (Government of Pakistan, 2018; Farooq et al., n.d.). However, it has received very critical reviews, with the point being made by several that the book contains the same kind of errors found in other publications by the same author. In their view, the SNC is a politically biased and unbalanced policy, backed by the federal government, which seeks to promote uniformity in the curriculum while imposing conformity to it in a multi ethnic, diverse, and polarised society (Shaikh and Benedetti, 2024). Khan (2024) shows how Islamist ideology underpinned the design of the SNC, where the curriculum was employed as a political rather than a rights-based approach for education.

According to Khatoon et al. (2022), there are four basic structural shortcomings: The SNC adopts a Muslim-centric approach towards the content, leaving minority students out; it abolishes educational autonomy at the provincial level guaranteed by the 18th Constitutional Amendment, while not investing in the infrastructure of public schools; it is not inscribed in a manner that captures the consensus of stakeholders; and it tries to control private schooling without funding the public sector's infrastructure. There is a central tension in these critiques that sees the SNC as "equalizing" while at the same time reducing inequality by "standardizing." There is a common theme in these critiques which sees the SNC as "equalizing," but at the same time "standardizing," which reproduces rather than challenges inequality in a highly stratified context. This is corroborated by Haider (2022), who asserts that there are numerous gaps in the implementation and Sherazi and Nawaz (2024), empirically estimate only 62% of the SNC English curriculum was implemented with 38% gap in the implementation of instructional materials and teacher training in Punjab.

### 2.2 Urdu, English, and the Language of Power

Since 1947 Pakistan's language policy can be said to have been marked by a continuous paradox between the symbolic primacy of Urdu and its practical domination by the English language. Rahman (2002) argues that this contradiction was rooted in the ideology of Urdu being a symbol of unity, and that Urdu was not a reality of the population at independence as it was the mother tongue of less than 8% of the population, but because of its political usefulness as a marker of Muslim Pakistani identity for the Punjabi-Mohajir ruling coalition. Rahman (1998) also proved that Urdu-medium state schools are ideological machines through their curriculum contents in disseminating the ideology of nationalism and militarism which is not being disseminated in the elite English-medium schools.

In a longitudinal study, inspired by Bourdieu (2022), Ashraf found that the linguistic orientations of the public have been reconfigured over the past almost two decades of language policies, wherein Urdu was given importance for its nationalistic connotations, whereas English was accorded importance for its economic connotations, and the regional languages were given no value at all. Manan and David (2014) empirically validated this bias among the cases of the undergraduate students, in which the value of the mother tongues is recognized as identity carriers whereas pragmatic and economic value is recognized for Urdu and English as languages of power. The same bifurcation was observed by Shahzad et al (2018) when the Urdu and English languages were seen to be symbols of the nationalism and global access, while the provincial languages were not given any policy attention in NEP 2017. Haleem and Saeed (2022)

also revealed that the gap between the national curriculum and Urdu curriculum SLOs is present in the Urdu curriculum even at the secondary level of education.

### 2.3 CDA and Language Ideology in the SNC

The SNC has been the subject of an increasing number of CDA scholarship efforts that have explored its ideological aspects. In a study of Urdu, Punjabi and English in political and policy writing, Hashmi et al. (2024) used DHA and found that the language policy of Pakistan is constantly redefined by the process of colonialism and elite power dynamics. In policy documents, political speeches and curriculum texts, Urdu is constructed as the national language, the moral language, and English as the elitist and progressive language while Punjabi is constructed as an uninstitutionalized language, as shown by Hashmi et al. (2025) by using Van Dijk's ideological square. Fayyaz Hussain et al. (2024) made use of Fairclough's framework on Urdu-Punjabi media discourses and found the existence of systematic linguistic difference which corresponds to formal policy hierarchy.

To carry out the analysis, Tayyab et al. (2022) used Fairclough (2003) CDA approach on the textbooks of SNC Grade 5 which showed that 50% of the textbooks contained religious ideology, and in Urdu textbook, the religious content is presented to be more effective than English. According to Numan and Ayaz (2023), the national stories are encouraged in SNC language education while the local culture is neglected. Zaheer (2022) found that the SNC Framework is in direct contradiction with cosmopolitan values, given the focus on the national identity, and that the pedagogy of rote-memorization was preventing authentic civic formation. By applying the Discourse Historical Approach of Wodak to the SNC textbooks, Tafseer et al. (2023) studied the SNC construction of learner identity and its inclusion/exclusion of learner diversity.

### 2.4 Marginalization of Regional Languages

The exclusion of the regional languages from formal education is well documented and has a real impact on Pakistan. Manan and David (2014) showed that pupils' academic literacy in their mother tongue is very low compared to that in Urdu and English, due to the lack of academic literacy in mother tongues in the formal curriculum. Khan et al. (2025) demonstrated that the NEP 2009 and Punjab Curriculum Policy 2015 do these in an effective way, which puts the language at risk of becoming non-viable in the educational context. Census data indicated that the percentage of speakers of the Punjabi language has been decreasing while it is Pakistan's most spoken language at 49%, as documented by Hussain et al. (2020) in formal and public discourse, Punjabi is marginalized.

Butt et al. (2024) followed an outcome of this exclusion to Bengali-speaking East Pakistanis through Discourse Historical Analysis: Urdu being imposed on Bengali-speaking East Pakistanis led to a language movement which in turn paved the way for the eventual break-up of the state in 1971. This offline marginalization is now being reproduced algorithmically, however, as Punjabi is not taught in formal settings, this directly leads to the lack of training data for natural language processing in artificial intelligence (AI) (Butt et al., 2025). Based on cognitive research linking multilingual education to bilingual curriculum, Garcia (2017) suggested the implementation of bilingual (Urdu-English) curriculum at primary and secondary level with at least four major provincial languages. This work is not reflected in any of the SNC documentations.

## 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical approach is structured in three complementary ways. Fairclough's (1992, 2003) CDA is a three-dimensional analysis which takes into account the multi-level nature of curriculum discourse. The tools provided by the ideological square of Van Dijk (2008) are able to be used to analyse the construction of language hierarchy by means of attributes and omissions. The theory of linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1991) is used to explain the material consequences of the constructions of discourse.

### 3.1 Fairclough's Three-Dimensional CDA

Fairclough (1992) contends that discourse is a text, a discursive practice and a social practice. Text-level analysis of the SNC corpus codes lexical choice, modality, nominalization, transitivity and presupposition in the SNC. Discursive practice analysis focuses on intertextual connections between SNC documents and the sixty-year NEP corpus, and explores how the various formations are reproduced, modified or challenged. Social practice analysis places results in the broader context of Pakistan's postcolonial political economy of language, which is defined by "the structural interests, institutional structures and material disparities that the discourse of the curriculum generates and perpetuates. The current analysis is based on three ideas in Fairclough's (1992, 2003) framework. The embedding of one discourse type in another, namely the phenomenon of interdiscursivity, is used to shed light on the importation of Islamic discourse in Urdu language SLOs, which is used to legitimize the nationalist discourse. Absent presuppositions (ideologically productive absences in texts) are used to elicit the ideological position of the SNC GK curriculum's absence of language(s) in the region. The analysis of promissory pluralism is based on the different levels of discursive practices (i.e., between public communication and classroom implementation).

### 3.2 Van Dijk's Ideological Square

Van Dijk's (2008) claims about the character of ideological discourse in its performance of four operations at the same time will be used to identify the kinds of operations that take place. In the SNC corpus, Urdu is in the in-group position and positive attributes are foregrounded while the negative attributes are suppressed (cohesion, patriotism, Muslim identity, imposition history). Regional languages are in the out-group position (cultural heritage, majority speaker status, cognitive advantages of L1 ability suppressed and negative attributes emphasized implicitly through association with informality and rurality). The position of English in an education system is structurally complex: a positive valued capital language and a negative valued colonial past whose class reproducing function is systematically undermined.

### 3.3 Bourdieu's Linguistic Capital

Bourdieu (1991) views language as capital for which the value of exchange depends on the social field in which it is moved. The languages not included in the systems of educational institutions, professions and the state lose symbolic capital, while those that are included gain in symbolic capital. The SNC's language course is based on the three registers of Bourdieu. The subject of English to embodied communicative skill (with investment of the assessment infrastructure) at the level of capital accumulation is an institutional recognition which raises the exchange value of English. The universalization of SNC in school types at the level of field reproduction means that the capital hierarchy (English over Urdu over regional languages) is reproduced in the same manner in both elite and government schools, thus making the inequality universal and not local. In terms of symbolic violence, the SNC's structural lack of attention to languages of the regions leaves the exclusion of regional languages in the formal linguistic market seemingly disinterested rather than intentional.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Research Design

The research design used in this study is qualitative with CDA approach. The SNC documents are not viewed as neutral curriculum specifications, but rather as socially situated documents that are being produced by the interaction between the social documents (text), the institutional context and the political economy of language in postcolonial Pakistan (Fairclough, 2003). This design is clearly critical, that is, its purpose is to draw attention to the ideology being constructed in the curriculum documents which claim to be politically neutral and technical.

### 4.2 The SNC Corpus

The main body of documents are five documents of SNC written between 2018 and 2020 namely, the National Education Policy Framework 2018, the SNC English Grades 1-5 (2020), the SNC Urdu Grades 1-5 (2020), the SNC General Knowledge Grades I-III (2020), the SNC Salient Features Pre I-V (2020). These are the full set of language and foundations documents for primary-level from the National Curriculum Council. The overview of the corpus is given in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Overview of the SNC Primary Corpus (2018–2020)

SNC Document	Year	Declared Language Goal	Medium of Instruction	Regional Language Provision in SLOs
SNC Framework	2018	Multilingual policy; mother tongue at primary; English as L2	Mother tongue at primary; Urdu and English thereafter	Generic: mother tongue permitted — no language named
SNC Urdu (Gr.1–5)	2020	Urdu as language of national cohesion, patriotism, and social integration	Urdu as primary medium; integrated with national values	Promotion of regional languages stated in Salient Features; zero SLOs in document
SNC English (Gr.1–5)	2020	English as language (not subject); communicative competence	English MoI for science/maths from Grade 6; communicative approach from Grade 1	No regional language provisions anywhere

SNC General Knowledge (Gr.I–III)	2020	Inquiry-based; outcomes-focused; SDG 4-aligned citizenship formation	Urdu assumed throughout; teacher guides written in English	Zero SLOs for any indigenous language across 8 standards, 3 grade levels, 79 pages
SNC Salient Features (Pre I–V)	2020	Universal implementation: government, private, Deeni Madaris	Unified; TIMSS-aligned for maths/science; Islamiyat from Grade 1	Regional language promotion claimed in summary only; unlinked to any SLO

Note. SNC = Single National Curriculum; MoI = Medium of Instruction; SLO = Student Learning Outcome; GK = General Knowledge. Sources: Government of Pakistan (2018, 2020a–d).

### 4.3 Analytical Procedure

There were three stages of analysis. In stage one, it was determined that every document – each SLO, benchmark, standard, thematic sequence – was read for lexical patterns, modal structures, nominalization, positive and negative attribution and the presence or absence of regional or indigenous language provisions, with the aim of identifying them. Stage two traced discursive continuities and innovations in SNC documents with the NEP corpus 1959-2018, by mapping intertextual links. In stage three the findings were interpreted in the theoretical approach, in light of the second literature. The four discursive themes that arose inductively were: nationalist legitimation, capital deepening, promissory pluralism and structural silence. The three main analytical focus are the first, third and fourth, which are related to the three research questions.

## 5. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### 5.1 Nationalist Legitimation: Urdu as Curriculum Competency

Language competencies that are explicitly specified in the SNC Urdu curriculum for Grades 1 – 5 include integration of values and attitudes such as patriotism, citizenship and promoting social cohesion. These are integrated with the same structure in the SNC's competency framework as speech, creative writing and aesthetic sense. The result of this is a textually accurate one: formally, the SNC turns the learner into a patriotic Pakistani citizen. This is not just incidental framing; it's a structural decision that has been inscribed at the benchmark and SLO level.

This construction continues with the Standard 4 of the SNC General Knowledge curriculum for Grades I-III that allows Grade I students to express their love and loyalty towards their country and to recognize the national flag, Quaid-e-Azam and Allama Iqbal as the founding fathers of Pakistan. The SLOs use high obligation verbs (demonstrate, recognize, identify) and affective verbs (love, loyalty) to create a civic formation that sees Pakistani identity as Islamic, Urdu-speaking and non-divisible. No SLOs exist for any Provincial historical figure, for any Provincial culture or for any Provincial contribution to national life.

The SLO with the best definition in the corpus is the Good Manners SLO which demands that students say Assalam o Alaikum, Hello, Good Morning—in that order. The SNC introduces the Islamic Arabic greeting as the first formal speech act in the unified national curriculum of Pakistan which is then used to build Urdu as the natural, moral and unquestionable language of the national life of Pakistan. It is not incidental – Assalam o Alaikum comes first, Islamic-Pakistani identity comes first, regional identities are missing.

This construction validates and intensifies the Urdu nationalism found in the NEPs from 1959 to 2018 (Rahman, 1998, 2002) in which Urdu nationalism was introduced into the curriculum content of textbooks while the SNC embeds Urdu nationalism in the competencies and SLOs that define what educators are expected to teach and what students are expected to learn and demonstrate. The legitimation of nationalists has shifted from an implicit to a structurally required. Table 2 shows the evidence that has been used in the text for all three themes.

**Table 2.** SLO-Level Textual Analysis of Discursive Strategies Across the SNC Primary Corpus

Document	Discursive Theme	Key SLO or Policy Claim (Paraphrased)	Textual Feature	Ideological Function
SNC Urdu Gr.1–5	Nationalist Legitimation	Competencies include patriotism, citizenship, and promotion of social cohesion at the same level as speech and creative writing	Nominalization: social cohesion, patriotism; equivalence structure places national values	Naturalizes Urdu–nation equivalence; learning the language = becoming Pakistani

			alongside language skills	
SNC GK Gr.I	Nationalist Legitimation	Students demonstrate love and loyalty toward their country; recognize the national flag; identify Quaid-e-Azam and Allama Iqbal	High-obligation imperatives: demonstrate, recognize, identify; affective lexis: love, loyalty	National identity constructed through Urdu-linked figures; no parallel SLOs for regional cultural heritage
SNC GK Gr.I	Nationalist Legitimation	Greet others: Assalam o Alaikum, Hello, Good Morning — in that sequence	Sequence order; Islamic greeting listed before English; embedded in formal SLO	Interdiscursivity: Islamic discourse borrowed to authorize Urdu as moral and natural medium of national life
SNC Salient Features	Promissory Pluralism	Promotion of diversity of culture and languages especially regional languages of Pakistan	Vague prescription: promotion of; no SLO, benchmark, assessment, or teacher guidance attached	Spatial performative paradox: inclusive claim at policy communication level; absent at curriculum enactment level
SNC English Gr.1–5	Capital Deepening	English to be taught as a language rather than a subject; higher focus on communicative competence; rubrics for all four skills	Re-classification: subject → language (embodied competence); material investment in assessment infrastructure	Deepens symbolic capital value of English; widens differential with Urdu and eliminates it for regional languages
SNC GK Gr.I–III	Structural Silence	Zero SLOs for any regional or indigenous language across 190+ SLOs, 8 knowledge standards, and all three grade levels	Absence as discourse; complete omission across pedagogical, assessment, and teacher-training sections	Fairclough’s absent presuppositions: what is not said is ideologically as productive as what is said

Note. All extracts paraphrased from SNC SLOs and policy claims. Textual features and ideological functions analyzed through Fairclough (1992, 2003) and Van Dijk (2008). Source documents: Government of Pakistan (2018, 2020a–d).

### 5.2 Capital Deepening: The SNC’s English Investment

The SNC English curriculum was the SNC’s biggest discursive departure from previous NEP, English is no longer a school subject, but a body of content to be learned, rather than a communicative competence to be acquired. This re-classification has a capital transformation effect as it moves English from a credential-bearing subject (examination capital) to a practice that shapes the habitus (embodied communicative capital) with a greater and more lasting exchange value in the professional and social arena of Pakistan, according to Bourdieu (1991).

It is also important on the material level of this capital deepening. In addition to the 2006 curriculum, the SNC English curriculum provides assessment guidelines and scoring rubrics and marking schemes for all four language skills (listening and speaking) omitted from the 2006 curriculum. This investment in assessment infrastructure (rubrics, schemes, proficiency benchmarks) is institutional recognition of English communicative competence in the sense of Bourdieu, in that it makes a skill into a form of capital that is recognized, measured and ranked. There is no assessment infrastructure available that equates with Urdu communicative competence and none at all for any regional language. To complement this, English is incorporated into the SNC English curriculum as the language of global citizenship education and thematic topics related to SDG 4, gender equality, diversity of cultures, and 21st century skills are introduced into the curriculum. This makes English the language through which Pakistani children are exposed to modernity, global values and international civic identity whilst Urdu has the national civic identity and regional languages have no place in the formal curriculum, as Zaheer (2022) shows. Consequently, the three levels of value:

English (global modernity + capital) Urdu (national identity + intermediate capital) regional languages (informal life + no institutional capital).

The SNC does not destroy, but rather perpetuates this hierarchy. The 38% implementation gap reported by Sherazi and Nawaz (2024) in Punjab is not an equalizer of access to the English capital but it is an unequal of the access to the English capital. The implementation is more complete in the private schools and English teachers are more available, and thus English communicative capital is accumulated more rapidly in the elite private schools than in government schools. The same level of asymmetric reproduction exists in Balochistan, as revealed in the study by Channa et al. (2025) whereby the gap between intended and enacted curriculum in the policy of EMI further strengthened the inequalities that already existed in Balochistan. Table 3 is an ideological square for these relations that maintain this hierarchy.

**Table 3.** Ideological Square Analysis of Language Representations Across the SNC Corpus

Van Dijk Move	Urdu (In-group)	English (Ambiguous Capital)	Mother Tongue / Regional Languages (Out-group)
Emphasize positive in-group	National cohesion; Muslim identity; patriotism; citizenship; social integration; vehicle of unity	Language of science, technology, SDG 4, 21st century skills, global citizenship, communicative competence	Not attributed a single positive trait in any SNC document across all five texts
Suppress negative in-group	Minority native-speaker status (7.5%) erased; colonial imposition on regional populations unmentioned; Bengali marginalization absent	Class exclusivity of English-medium schooling omitted; colonial legacy erased from SNC critique; elite reproduction through EMI unacknowledged	Not applicable
Emphasize negative out-group	Not applicable (Urdu is in-group)	SNC does not critique English; NEP 2017 condemned elite fees — SNC 2020 omits even this	Implicitly coded as informal, rural, non-literate, pre-modern; no association with development, modernity, or academic achievement
Suppress positive out-group	Not applicable	English's role in elite reproduction acknowledged only implicitly through communicative investment; privilege never named	Cultural heritage, majority speaker status (Punjabi 49%), cognitive advantages of L1 literacy, pedagogical value — all systematically absent

Note. Framework adapted from Van Dijk (2008). Language attributions derived from SLO-level analysis of SNC documents (Government of Pakistan, 2018, 2020a–d). Secondary analyses draw on Hashmi et al. (2025), Fayyaz Hussain et al. (2024), and Ashraf (2022).

### 5.3 Promissory Pluralism and Structural Silence

#### 5.3.1 Promissory Pluralism: A New Discursive Category

The following statement is made in the SNC Salient Features document (which is disseminated to the public for communication purposes and is a summary of the policy): Promotion of diversity of culture and languages especially regional languages of Pakistan. This claim is examined in the light of the SNC's curriculum documents which have been enacted, and is the most clear-cut example of what this study calls promissory pluralism.

Structurally, the promissory pluralism is different from the promissory deferral that has been observed in the Pakistan's NEPs from 1959-2018. The procedural vagueness (arrangements, measures) and high obligation modality (shall be made, will replace) of promissory deferral works through time through deferring compliance to an indeterminate future. Promissory pluralism occurs in a space: the inclusion claim can be found in one level of the policy communication (Salient features, produced for public and political legitimation) and not at the other (curriculum enactment, SLOs, benchmarks and standards teachers are expected to implement). This is not a matter of time, but of

structure, i.e. the claim was never linked to an implementation mechanism. The promise and the lack of it are at the same time and in the same policy moment.

The mechanism of promissory pluralism in the SNC can be stated clearly: the language of the region is mentioned in the Salient Features document but is not accompanied by an SLO, a benchmark or an assessment criterion or a teacher guideline in any SNC curriculum document. The SNC General Knowledge curriculum in the form of a complete audit of the curriculum for grades I–III that provides a blueprint for the years of primary language socialization shows no SLOs in any regional or indigenous language, across 79 pages of curriculum in three grade levels covering eight general knowledge standards. The pedagogical content area of inquiry-based teaching, cooperative learning, role-play, and performance assessment, along with assessment content areas of checklists, rubrics, portfolios, and peer review, are completely missing from the 79-page document, and include no reference to mother-tongue bridging, region language acknowledgment, and multilingual classroom management.

### **5.3.2 Structural Silence as Ideological Practice**

The idea of structural silence is an extension of Fairclough's (1992) absent presupposition to the curriculum architecture level. When an ideological assumption is so naturalized that it is not explicitly mentioned in the text, it is an absent presupposition in a text, and its absence in the text is a discursive position. In the context of SNC GK curriculum, the naturalization of the belief that Urdu is the natural language of all children of Pakistan irrespective of their mother tongues is so much rooted that there is no need to make any statement in this regard. It just goes on as if everyone doesn't speak Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Balochi or any other language as their native language, and for whom it is written.

Structural silence has an ideological outcome in the form of symbolic violence – the exercise of a misrecognized domination that the dominated see as “the way things are” (Bourdieu, 1991). When children step into the classrooms of the SNC system in Pakistan, they find their language (Punjabi) is absent from the classrooms in all aspects, whether as medium of instruction or as a subject or as a cultural resource or as a 'bridge'. The curriculum is silent about their language and teaches them before they have a language lesson that their language has no place in formal learning. This isn't something that the SNC did on purpose, it is part of the SNC, as the evidence shown.

## **6. DISCUSSION**

### **6.1 The SNC's Language Hierarchy Discourse: Uniformity as Stratification**

Based on the results of Section 5, the three occurred discursive themes were identified as the language hierarchy discourse in this study, which will be called SNC's language hierarchy discourse. This discourse simultaneously puts Urdu nationalism into the form of a civic competency, enhances the value of English as a material communicative capital and eradicates mother tongues in the structural silence of promissory pluralism. They all perform some operation on the other(s). In the absence of any institutionalized space in which regional languages can compete with Urdu and English, the latter is legitimated through nationalist's justifications while English is justified through the economic reasons of capital deepening.

This universalization claim of the SNC is not an equity claim per se, but a standardization claim: the hierarchy of all schools is being universalized, the hierarchy that was reproduced differently in other schools. Now the government schools are introducing the same SLOs as the elite private schools and for the first time, Deeni Madaris are integrated. The implication is that the language capital advantage of elite schools is not being lost, but instead the ideological formation of Urdu (for identity) and English (for opportunity) and nothing else (regional languages) is now being replicated for all Pakistani students.

### **6.2 Intensification of Nationalist Legitimation: From Implicit to Structural**

The most important discovery with regard to previous scholarship is the SNC's strengthening of its nationalistic legitimation by moving it from implicit textbook ideology to the formal curriculum competency. Urdu-medium school since 1947 had been an ideological apparatus as described by Rahman (1998, 2002) via the content of the textbooks (stories of national heroes, militarist stories, Islamic framing). The SNC pushes this function up the stream: now the nationalistic values are embedded within the SLOs, competency frameworks, which precede and impact the content of textbooks. The findings of Tayyab et al. (2022) revealed that 50% of all the contents in the SNC textbooks is religious ideologically; in the present study, it was observed that the religious ideologically content of the textbooks is preceded and framed by SLOs that explicitly include patriotism and social cohesion as outcomes of the Urdu language.

The Assalam o Alaikum SLO is the most theoretically complex of these intensifications. The conception of interdiscursivity of Fairclough (2003) makes it easier to identify the mechanism: The Islamic discourse is borrowed to authorize Urdu's positioning as the natural and pre-political medium of Pakistani life. In the present study, the ideological construction was found in the first year of the primary education curriculum which is the first formal SLO of the first year of primary education in Pakistan, thereby proving that it is now a part of the first formal SLO of national language socialization in Pakistan. In the present study, the construction of ideology was found in the first

year of the primary education curriculum, the first formal SLO of the first year of primary education, which is the first act of national language socialization in Pakistan.

### **6.3 Capital Deepening and the Limits of Universalization**

The SNC's significant economic shift is from subject to language of English. Using secondary analysis of the findings of this study, Ashraf (2022) reported that linguistic orientation of the public is already found to be ambivalent between Urdu (identity) and English (mobility) and is being restructured by the market forces towards English orientation. The restructuring of English is complemented by the SNC's English curriculum, which institutionalizes the assessment of communicative English that is not possible in Urdu assessment, and cannot be envisioned in the regional language assessment as there is no provision there. Mother tongues are seen only as identity bearers, as has been confirmed by Manan and David (2014) when they showed that the mother tongues have no capital generating institutional domain. Even when there is an implementation gap as is reflected in Punjab (38% per Sherazi and Nawaz, 2024) and more strongly Balochistan (Channa et al., 2025), this does not reduce the capital hierarchy; it will only be reproduced asynchronously. With a well-stocked SNC, English capital grows quickly. The lack of resources has been a major problem in certain settings where the SNC is trying to promote English – government schools, rural areas, and marginalized provinces – and the lack of infrastructure reinforces the very stratification the SNC sought to eliminate. Universalization of an aspiration doesn't mean universalization of the resources to reach that aspiration. Not universalizing the resources to reach the aspiration is not equity, it's expanding aspiration without the expansion of access.

### **6.4 Promissory Pluralism: Theory and Policy Implications**

The term promissory pluralism is also at the same time original and theoretically innovative in the field of the discourse of language policy in postcolonial contexts. It encapsulates a type of policy legitimation which has not been examined in such a fashion in the South Asian literature. It differs from that of Tollefson (2006) use of dominant language ideology, however, because it also involves a mechanism, namely the spatial distance between policy levels. It is also in contrast with the promissory deferral, in that it points to a gap that is not temporal, but synchronous. It also offers a more nuanced description of the 'pluralism vs. uniformity tension' (Shaikh and Benedetti, 2024) than the one that focuses solely on the 'political level' of the policy, as seen in the policy's political context.

The policy implication is straight forward. When promissory pluralism is a structural mechanism (a spatial gap between policy communication and enactment of the curriculum, which is reproducible and durable), the key to its resolution is institutional bridging mechanisms such as rights-based SLOs for regional language in enacted curriculum documents, assessment provisions for multilingual classrooms, and teacher training frameworks that include mother-tongue bridging pedagogy. These are missing from the SNC Salient Features or Framework documents, and the absence of structural silence at the SLO level will result in future changes to the Salient Features or Framework in new lexical forms and a continuation of promissory pluralism.

### **6.5 Structural Silence and Its Digital Extension**

The lack of a structural approach to mother tongues in the SNC's curriculum, which has been enacted, has repercussions outside the classroom. Butt et al. (2025) found that the absence of a formal educational domain for the use of Punjabi naturally leads to the lack of training data for AI natural language processing systems for the use of the language. Less formal written text equals less AI training data equals lower performance of NLP equals less formal written communications for Punjabi speakers, less information retrieval, less services that are mediated by AI. The SNC is therefore not restricted to the classroom: it spreads into the formal written product of a generation and the infrastructure of digital experience that will be a conduit in their adult civic and professional experiences.

Butt et al. (2024) have already showed the most extreme historical outcome of linguistic exclusion of imposing Urdu on Bengali speakers that helped the breakup of the Pakistani state in 1971. The present study does not claim that the SNC will generate a similar impact, but it is affirmed that the structural mechanism, linguistic exclusion through the formal curriculum silence has been the same one that has generated this impact. Although the proposal for bilingual Urdu-English education in combination with provincial languages at both primary and secondary level, proposed by Garcia (2017) appears to be most thoroughly developed alternative in the literature, it has not yet been implemented.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

This research shown that the Single National Curriculum, which was being touted as a ground-breaking step towards educational justice in Pakistan, is a discourse that creates a hierarchy of languages: Urdu nationalism is made canon and mainstream in the formal curriculum, English is institutionalized as the language of higher value, and regional and local languages are erased from the formal discourse by their omission through a structural silence. This paper has proposed a new discursive category of 'promissory pluralism' that refers to the spatial distance between the

inclusion claim made in the policy communication and zero provisions enacted in the curriculum, which is structurally different from the temporal promissory deferral witnessed in Pakistan's NEPs from 1959 to 2018.

Three original contributions have been made. The study is the first audit done on an SNC primary curriculum document to document the systematic evidence that there is no mention of any regional or indigenous language in 190+ SLOs across 8 knowledge standards and 3 grade levels of the General Knowledge curriculum. It brings into the fore a new discursive category of promissory pluralism as a theoretically unique and generalizable phenomenon of postcolonial language policy issues, which transcends Pakistan's situation. It shows that it is not universalization of SNC that breaks the cycle of the stratification of language in Pakistan's education system since the establishment of Pakistan in 1947, rather it is a designed feature of the curriculum itself.

There are two directions for future research which are evident. Firstly, the current study analyses of declared curriculum (policy documents) but ethnographic studies of classroom and teacher interview research would help to reveal the reproduction or resistance of the SNC's language hierarchy discourse in practice, especially in the linguistically diverse provinces like Sindh, KP-Khan, Balochistan and others. Second, the digital extension of structural silence documented by Butt et al. (2025) calls for special study and analysis of the SNC discourse in the new AI systems that are increasingly shaping education, employment and civic engagement in Pakistan.

The true challenge and need of an equitable SNC is not the need to revise its Salient Features document but to redesign the currently in-place and taught curriculum in terms of rights: SLOs for regional languages in the subject curricula; assessment frameworks for multilingual primary classrooms; and teacher training programs that build the competencies of mother-tongue bridging in Pakistan's linguistically diverse children. What the SNC will continue to provide with uniformity is the inequality that it has been sworn to eradicate: until the structural silence is overcome by structural provision, it will do so.

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