



## ***Marginalization of Pashto Language in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Education Policies: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Curriculum Documents***

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### ***Abstract:***

*This study investigates the marginalization of Pashto within the education system of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan, through a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of curriculum policy documents. Despite Pashto being the majority language in KPK, the province's education policies prioritize Urdu and English as primary mediums of instruction, positioning Pashto in a peripheral role. Drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework, this research examines the textual, discursive, and socio-political dimensions of curriculum discourse to reveal how linguistic hierarchies are ideologically constructed and maintained. The analysis highlights a consistent alignment of curriculum objectives with national unity narratives and economic modernization discourses, both of which privilege Urdu and English while framing Pashto as a language of limited socio-economic utility. Findings indicate that curriculum policies reproduce linguistic inequality by limiting Pashto's presence to cultural subjects or early education, thereby undermining its role in intellectual and academic domains. The study concludes by proposing an inclusive, multilingual policy model that recognizes Pashto as a genuine medium of instruction across educational levels. This research contributes to the broader understanding of language policy, identity politics, and cultural reproduction in multilingual societies.*

**Keywords:** *marginalization, hierarchies, proposing, three-dimensional, genuine, framing*

## **Introduction:**

Language policy within formal education is a critical site for the negotiation of identity, power, and ideology. In multilingual contexts, such as Pakistan, curriculum decisions regarding language of instruction are deeply intertwined with historical legacies, national identity construction, and socio-political hierarchies. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pashto is the majority mother tongue and a core element of regional identity. However, despite its sociolinguistic significance, Pashto remains marginalized within the province's formal education system, with Urdu and English occupying dominant positions in curriculum policy. This marginalization raises fundamental questions about linguistic equity, cultural representation, and the reproduction of dominant ideologies in education.

The historical roots of this marginalization can be traced to colonial language hierarchies established during British rule, where English became the language of governance, education, and prestige, while regional languages were relegated to the informal and domestic spheres. Post-independence language policy in Pakistan has largely maintained these hierarchies, with Urdu positioned as the national unifying language and English as the language of upward mobility. Within this framework, Pashto is often portrayed as culturally rich but academically and economically limited, reinforcing its peripheral role in formal education.

The ideological implications of this arrangement extend beyond pedagogy to issues of cultural identity and political representation. As Fairclough (2015) notes, discourse is a form of social practice that both reflects and shapes power relations. Curriculum policy texts in KPK not only reflect existing language hierarchies but also actively reproduce them through selective inclusion, exclusion, and framing of linguistic resources. The lack of Pashto as a medium of instruction in key academic subjects implicitly constructs it as unsuitable for domains of science, technology, and formal governance, thus contributing to its symbolic devaluation.

This study applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how KPK's curriculum policies reinforce or challenge the marginalization of Pashto. CDA provides the theoretical and methodological tools to uncover the ideological underpinnings of policy language, revealing how seemingly neutral educational objectives are embedded within broader socio-political agendas.

## **Research Questions:**

1. How is Pashto represented in KPK's curriculum policy documents about Urdu and English?
2. In what ways do curriculum policies in KPK reinforce or challenge the marginalization of Pashto as a medium of instruction?

## **Research Objectives**

1. To critically examine the representation of Pashto in the curriculum policy documents of KPK.

2. To analyze how linguistic hierarchies between Urdu, English, and Pashto are constructed in policy discourse

### Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it addresses the intersection of language policy, education, and regional identity in a province where Pashto holds both cultural prominence and political importance. By applying Critical Discourse Analysis, the research not only identifies linguistic inequalities but also reveals the ideological underpinnings that sustain them. The findings can inform policymakers, educators, and curriculum developers about the need for more inclusive language policies that recognize Pashto's academic potential. Furthermore, it contributes to the broader discourse on linguistic justice and cultural preservation in multilingual societies.

### Literature Review

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a powerful theoretical and methodological lens for examining the ideological functions of language within educational policy. Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional model—textual analysis, discursive practice, and socio-cultural practice—provides a framework for uncovering how curriculum policy documents construct, legitimize, and reproduce linguistic hierarchies. Language policy texts, when viewed through this lens, are not neutral statements of educational priorities; they are discursive instruments that reflect and perpetuate particular ideologies, privileging some linguistic identities while marginalizing others (Tollefson & Pérez-Milans, 2020).

Van Dijk's (2021) socio-cognitive model complements this perspective by situating discourse within broader systems of knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes. In the context of education, curriculum policies embody both the explicit and implicit ideological orientations of the state. These orientations influence which languages are designated as legitimate mediums of instruction and which are relegated to peripheral cultural or symbolic functions. Wodak and Meyer (2022) argue that CDA's strength lies in revealing these subtle, often unacknowledged, mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion, enabling critical engagement with the socio-political consequences of policy decisions.

The marginalization of regional and minority languages in education is a global phenomenon, often linked to nation-building processes that prioritize linguistic homogeneity. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, English, French, and Portuguese dominate as official languages of education, while indigenous languages are limited to early primary schooling or excluded entirely (Bamgbose, 2020). Similar patterns emerge in South Asia, where national and colonial languages maintain dominance in formal education at the expense of local vernaculars (Mohanty, 2021).

Research in Canada demonstrates that indigenous languages, despite constitutional protections, remain endangered due to limited curricular integration and inadequate teacher training (McIvor & Anisman, 2021). In Spain, regional languages like Basque and Catalan face fluctuating policy support depending on political shifts, illustrating the role of ideology and governance in sustaining or eroding linguistic diversity (Lasagabaster, 2020). These examples highlight a recurring tension: education systems often operate as vehicles for standardizing

national identity, thereby sidelining linguistic diversity in the name of cohesion and modernization.

Pakistan's language policy has historically positioned Urdu as the national unifying language, with English retained as the language of administration, higher education, and global engagement (Rahman, 2021). This dual-language dominance reflects both post-colonial continuity and the ideological project of constructing a singular national identity. Regional languages, including Pashto, Sindhi, Balochi, and Punjabi, are recognized as culturally important but rarely granted equal status in curriculum policy, particularly in secondary and tertiary education (Manan et al., 2020).

In KPK, Pashto has a strong oral and literary tradition, yet its integration into formal schooling remains limited to primary-level instruction and cultural subjects. Curriculum policy documents frequently position Pashto as a language of heritage rather than as a medium for science, technology, or global discourse. As Khan (2022) notes, this discursive framing reinforces perceptions of Pashto as academically and economically less valuable than Urdu or English, perpetuating socio-linguistic inequalities. Furthermore, the absence of Pashto in competitive examinations and higher education syllabi entrenches its marginalization, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of linguistic disempowerment.

Scholarly engagement with Pashto's role in KPK education reveals a persistent gap between policy rhetoric and practical implementation. Official documents may acknowledge the cultural significance of Pashto, yet policy directives and resource allocations overwhelmingly favor Urdu and English (Safi, 2021). Teacher training programs, textbook development, and standardized assessments are primarily designed for Urdu and English instruction, leaving Pashto under-resourced in pedagogical infrastructure (Ahmad & Zeb, 2023).

The marginalization is further compounded by ideological narratives that associate Urdu with national unity and English with socio-economic advancement, while relegating Pashto to the domain of folklore and tradition. This aligns with Bourdieu's (1991) theory of linguistic capital, wherein languages associated with political and economic power are valorized, and others are devalued in formal domains. In interviews with teachers, Ahmad and Zeb (2023) found that even Pashto-speaking educators often prioritized Urdu or English in classroom interactions due to perceived professional expectations and career advantages.

From a CDA perspective, the textual and discursive structures of KPK's curriculum policies exhibit what Fairclough (2015) terms "strategic vagueness," where commitment to multilingualism is expressed rhetorically but undermined in practice through omission, selective focus, and prioritization of dominant languages. The persistence of this pattern suggests that Pashto's marginalization is not merely a by-product of oversight but a deliberate ideological positioning aligned with broader state language agendas.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate how curriculum policy documents in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) represent and

position Pashto in relation to Urdu and English. CDA is particularly suitable for this study because it enables an in-depth examination of the relationship between language, power, and ideology in institutional discourse (Fairclough, 2015; Wodak & Meyer, 2022). By analyzing the textual, discursive, and socio-cultural dimensions of curriculum policies, this research seeks to uncover the ideological processes that sustain linguistic hierarchies in KPK's education system.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study employs Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA as its analytical framework. This model consists of:

1. **Textual Analysis** – examining vocabulary, grammar, and rhetorical structures to identify patterns of inclusion, exclusion, and emphasis regarding Pashto.
2. **Discursive Practice** – analyzing how curriculum policies are produced, distributed, and consumed, including the institutional and political contexts influencing their creation.
3. **Socio-Cultural Practice** – situating the discourse within broader historical, political, and ideological structures, particularly Pakistan's post-colonial language policy and national identity narratives.

This multi-layered approach ensures that the analysis goes beyond surface-level description to address the deeper socio-political forces shaping language representation in education.

### **Data Sources**

The primary data consists of official KPK curriculum policy documents from the past decade, including:

- Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Education Sector Plan 2020–2025
- Curriculum frameworks for primary and secondary education
- Language policy sections from the KPK Textbook Board guidelines

To complement these documents, selected Pashto, Urdu, and English textbooks from Grades 1–10 were examined for linguistic representation and ideological framing. Secondary sources include academic studies, government reports, and NGO publications on language policy and education in KPK.

### **Sampling Strategy**

A purposive sampling approach was adopted to select documents that explicitly address language use, medium of instruction, and curriculum content. This ensured that the data directly relates to the research questions. Textbook selection was based on their official status in government schools and their relevance to subjects where Pashto could potentially serve as a medium of instruction, but is absent.

## Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in three stages, aligned with Fairclough's CDA model:

1. **Textual Analysis** – Identification of keywords, collocations, and semantic fields related to Pashto, Urdu, and English. Particular attention was paid to evaluative adjectives, modality, and nominalization that reveal implicit attitudes toward each language.
2. **Discursive Practice Analysis** – Examination of the policy production process, including authorship, institutional oversight, and intended audience. This step also considered intertextual references to national education policies and global development agendas.
3. **Socio-Cultural Analysis** – Interpretation of findings in relation to historical language hierarchies, post-colonial identity construction, and globalization's influence on language priorities.

NVivo software was used to code recurring themes and linguistic patterns, enabling systematic organization of qualitative data.

## Ethical Considerations

Although this study analyzes publicly available documents, ethical responsibility was maintained by ensuring accurate representation of sources and avoiding misinterpretation. Where paraphrasing of official texts was necessary, care was taken to retain the original meaning. Additionally, the analysis acknowledges the potential sensitivity of critiquing state education policies, particularly in politically and culturally diverse contexts like KPK.

## Analysis

### Textual Analysis

A review of KPK's curriculum policy documents reveals a lexical prioritization of Urdu and English as the primary mediums of instruction, while Pashto is often mentioned only in cultural or symbolic contexts. In the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Education Sector Plan 2020–2025, for instance, policy language emphasizes “the promotion of Urdu as the lingua franca” and “English as the language of science and technology,” while Pashto is described as “an important regional language to be preserved through cultural activities.” This selective framing positions Pashto as heritage-oriented rather than academically functional.

Linguistic analysis of the policy text shows a frequent use of modal verbs such as shall and must in reference to Urdu and English (e.g., “English shall be introduced from Grade 1”), indicating strong institutional commitment. In contrast, references to Pashto employ softer modal verbs like may or vague phrasing (e.g., “Pashto may be taught where feasible”), which reduces its policy force. This aligns with van Dijk's (2021) observation that modal choices in policy discourse reflect underlying ideological priorities.

Furthermore, semantic collocations reveal associations between Urdu/English and progress, modernity, and global competitiveness, whereas Pashto is linked to tradition, folklore, and local

identity. Such associations subtly guide readers toward viewing Urdu and English as languages of advancement and Pashto as a language of the past.

### **Discursive Practice Analysis**

The production of curriculum policies in KPK involves collaboration between provincial education boards, the federal Ministry of Education, and donor agencies such as UNESCO and the British Council. These stakeholders bring differing language ideologies, but global development discourse—often dominated by English—exerts considerable influence. For example, policy drafts frequently reference “21st-century skills” and “integration into the global knowledge economy,” both of which are framed as achievable primarily through English-medium instruction.

Intertextual analysis reveals that KPK policy documents often replicate language from Pakistan’s National Education Policy 2017, which explicitly states that Urdu will serve as the primary medium of instruction while English will be strengthened for international competitiveness. Pashto, though acknowledged, receives no such strategic positioning. This borrowing of federal policy discourse illustrates how provincial autonomy in language planning is constrained by national frameworks, leading to discursive reproduction of central government language hierarchies.

The consumption of these policies by teachers and school administrators further reinforces the marginalization of Pashto. Interviews reported in Ahmad and Zeb (2023) indicate that many Pashto-speaking teachers still prefer using Urdu in classrooms, citing exam preparation needs and perceptions of professional legitimacy. This shows how policy discourse is not only produced but also internalized in ways that sustain linguistic inequality.

### **Socio-Cultural Practice Analysis**

Situating the discourse within Pakistan’s historical and political context reveals deep-rooted colonial legacies and nation-building ideologies. English retains its colonial prestige as the language of administration, law, and higher education, while Urdu has been elevated as a unifying national symbol post-independence. Pashto, despite being spoken by a majority in KPK, is positioned as a regional identity marker rather than a vehicle for socio-economic mobility.

This ideological positioning has tangible social consequences. Students educated primarily in Urdu or English gain greater access to higher education and employment opportunities, while those in Pashto-medium contexts face structural disadvantages. As Bourdieu’s (1991) theory of linguistic capital suggests, the educational system legitimizes the dominant languages by associating them with authority, competence, and success, thereby perpetuating class and ethnic inequalities.

Moreover, the hidden curriculum in KPK schools reinforces these hierarchies. Even when Pashto is included in timetables, it is often allocated fewer teaching hours, taught with outdated materials, or sidelined for exam preparation in Urdu/English. This reinforces the perception that Pashto is academically “less serious” or “less useful.”

## Key Patterns and Findings

Across all three dimensions of Fairclough's model, the marginalization of Pashto in KPK's education system emerges as systemic and ideologically embedded:

1. **Textually** – Strong, obligatory policy language for Urdu/English vs. vague, optional language for Pashto.
2. **Discursively** – Policy production reproduces federal language hierarchies and global English-dominated discourses.
3. **Socio-culturally** – Colonial legacies and nation-building priorities frame Pashto as culturally valuable but economically irrelevant.

These patterns indicate that Pashto's limited role in education is not simply an oversight but a deliberate outcome of ideological positioning that privileges dominant languages. The result is a linguistic hierarchy that aligns with broader socio-political agendas, reinforcing cultural centralization and limiting regional linguistic agency.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to examine how curriculum policy documents in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) represent and position Pashto concerning Urdu and English, and in what ways these policies reinforce or challenge the marginalization of Pashto as a medium of instruction. Through the application of Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model, it became evident that Pashto's role in the provincial education system is systematically constrained by both textual framing and broader socio-political forces.

At the textual level, policy documents employ strong modal and prescriptive language for Urdu and English, framing them as essential for national cohesion and global competitiveness. In contrast, references to Pashto are couched in optional, non-committal terms, often linking it solely to cultural preservation. This lexical asymmetry signals an implicit hierarchy in which Pashto is not positioned as a legitimate medium for academic or professional advancement.

At the discursive practice level, the production of KPK's curriculum policy reflects significant intertextual borrowing from federal language policy frameworks, particularly the National Education Policy, which prioritizes Urdu and English. The influence of global development discourses, often mediated through donor agencies and international organizations, further reinforces the dominance of English. Consumption patterns among educators reveal internalized acceptance of these hierarchies, as many Pashto-speaking teachers opt for Urdu or English even when Pashto is officially permitted.

At the socio-cultural practice level, the marginalization of Pashto is deeply embedded in Pakistan's colonial and post-colonial linguistic order. English retains its symbolic capital as the language of governance and elite education, while Urdu functions as a national identity marker. Pashto is framed as regionally significant but economically peripheral, perpetuating socio-linguistic inequalities and restricting upward mobility for Pashto-speaking communities.

## Recommendations

To address these disparities, a shift toward a multilingual education policy is essential:

1. **Policy Reform** – Explicitly designate Pashto as a medium of instruction beyond the early grades, particularly in social sciences and humanities, to normalize its academic use.
2. **Curriculum Development** – Produce contemporary Pashto-language textbooks in science, mathematics, and technology, ensuring terminological modernization and accessibility.
3. **Teacher Training** – Develop Pashto-medium pedagogical training programs to equip teachers with the skills and confidence to deliver instruction in Pashto.
4. **Assessment Integration** – Include Pashto as an optional medium in provincial examination systems to legitimize its role in academic achievement.
5. **Public Awareness Campaigns** – Promote the intellectual and professional value of Pashto through media and community outreach, countering perceptions of its limited utility.

By reconceptualizing Pashto not merely as a heritage language but as a viable medium of academic and professional engagement, the education system in KPK can move toward greater linguistic equity. Such a shift would not only preserve cultural identity but also democratize access to educational and socio-economic opportunities for Pashto-speaking populations.

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