

English as a Symbol of Prestige: A Study of Language Attitudes among Pakistani Students

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the perception of English as a symbol of prestige among Pakistani university students and examines how their language attitudes reflect broader social hierarchies and identity formations. Drawing on the framework of sociolinguistics and language ideology, the research investigates how students' linguistic preferences and attitudes toward English and indigenous languages manifest in educational and social domains. Data were collected through a mixed-method approach involving a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with 100 undergraduate students from both public and private universities in Pakistan. Findings revealed that English is widely perceived as a language of power, education, and upward mobility, while indigenous languages are associated with cultural identity but lower socioeconomic status. The study highlights how the dominance of English reinforces linguistic inequality and shapes students' aspirations, self-perceptions, and social belonging. Implications for language policy and education in multilingual societies like Pakistan are also discussed.

Keywords: English language attitudes, prestige, sociolinguistics, Pakistani students, language ideology, linguistic hierarchy

INTRODUCTION

Language serves not only as a medium of communication but also as a marker of identity, power, and social status. In postcolonial societies like Pakistan, English occupies a unique and often controversial position. Since its introduction during British colonial rule, English has continued to function as a dominant language in education, administration, business, and media. It is widely regarded as a symbol of modernity, progress, and upward mobility. The English language, therefore, carries a strong sense of prestige and privilege, often distinguishing the educated elite from the rest of the population. This perception has contributed to the formation of a linguistic hierarchy in which proficiency in English equates to intelligence, sophistication, and higher social standing (Abbas, 2018; Ahmed, 2015 and Ashraf, 2023).

In Pakistan, language use and attitudes are deeply tied to issues of class, culture, and access to resources. English functions as a gatekeeper to socioeconomic advancement, offering access to prestigious universities, lucrative careers, and global opportunities. Consequently, the ability to speak and write English fluently is often seen as a key determinant of success, particularly among university students who aspire to join professional and international domains. However, this prestige attached to English has also intensified social and linguistic inequalities. While students from elite, English-medium institutions tend

to enjoy greater linguistic capital, those from Urdu- or regional-language backgrounds often face marginalization and feelings of inferiority. This has given rise to a complex interplay between language, identity, and power within Pakistan's educational landscape (Khalid, 2016; Haider, 2019; Astuti 2021 and Lubis 2015).

The phenomenon of English as a symbol of prestige is not merely linguistic but also socio-psychological. Students' attitudes toward English reflect their perceptions of self-worth, aspirations, and social belonging. Many students associate English with modernity, confidence, and global citizenship, whereas others view it as a threat to local languages and cultural authenticity. Such ambivalence is particularly pronounced in multilingual societies like Pakistan, where English coexists with Urdu and several regional languages, each carrying its own historical and cultural significance. Understanding these attitudes is crucial because they directly influence language learning motivation, classroom participation, and academic achievement (Rehman, 2024; Sarhadi, 2024).

In recent years, globalization, digital media, and international educational exposure have further reinforced the symbolic value of English in Pakistan. English proficiency is increasingly considered a social asset, shaping how students perceive themselves and others in both academic and social contexts. Consequently, investigating students' attitudes toward English as a symbol of prestige can provide valuable insights into the broader sociolinguistic and cultural dynamics of the country (Shehbaz, 2018; Qasim, 2022).

Therefore, this study aims to examine Pakistani university students' attitudes toward English as a language of prestige and social mobility and to explore how students' socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds influence their perceptions and use of English in academic and social settings. Through this exploration, the research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how English continues to shape identities, reinforce hierarchies, and influence educational experiences in Pakistan.

Statement of the Problem

In Pakistan, English occupies a dominant position as the language of education, administration, and upward social mobility. Despite being a postcolonial society with rich indigenous languages, English continues to serve as a symbol of prestige and modernity, often associated with intelligence, sophistication, and economic success. This sociolinguistic hierarchy has led many students to develop favorable attitudes toward English, sometimes at the expense of their native languages. However, the extent to which this perceived prestige shapes students' identity, language preferences, and attitudes toward local languages remains underexplored. There is a growing need to investigate how Pakistani students perceive English—not merely as a medium of communication but as a marker of social class and privilege. Understanding these attitudes is crucial to revealing the underlying linguistic inequalities that persist in Pakistan's educational and social systems.

Research Objectives

The study includes the following objectives;

1. To examine Pakistani university students' attitudes toward English as a language of prestige and social mobility.
2. To explore how students' socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds influence their perceptions and use of English in academic and social contexts.

Research Questions

1. How do Pakistani university students perceive English as a symbol of prestige and a means of social mobility?

2. In what ways do students' socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds shape their attitudes toward and use of English in both academic and social settings?

Significance of the Study

Meanwhile, this study holds significance on both academic and social levels. Academically, it contributes to the growing body of sociolinguistic research that investigates language attitudes in postcolonial contexts, particularly in South Asia. It sheds light on how English functions as a socio-symbolic resource rather than a mere linguistic tool. Socially, the study underscores the implications of linguistic prestige in reinforcing class distinctions and shaping students' self-perception and opportunities. Understanding these dynamics can assist policymakers, educators, and curriculum developers in promoting more equitable language practices within educational institutions, thereby fostering linguistic inclusivity and social cohesion in Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ahmed (2015) conducted a survey-based study of 238 undergraduate EFL learners at a public Malaysian university to examine students' attitudes toward English; using a 19-item questionnaire, the study aimed to identify learners' attitudes toward using English in different domains, explore causes that influence English learning, and capture the perspectives of non-major English learners. Ahmed found that overall attitudes toward English were strongly positive (students valued English for academic and professional purposes and as a global lingua franca), though students reported reservations about classroom instruction and some instructional/learning conditions; the results therefore suggest a gap between learners' favourable orientation to English as a language and their dissatisfaction with certain aspects of local classroom experience and pedagogy.

Lubis (2015) investigated students' attitudes toward English by surveying students at the LP3i/related vocational-college context in Medan using a questionnaire-based design; the study's objective was to describe learners' attitudes to learning English and to the English teacher, and the data consisted of student responses measuring affective, cognitive and behavioral perceptions of the language and instruction. Lubis found that the majority of respondents held positive attitudes toward learning English and toward their English teacher, indicating generally favourable perceptions of the language-learning experience in that setting.

Astuti (2021) conducted a descriptive qualitative study to investigate students' language attitude and language choice toward English among second-year students of the English Education Study Program at Palangka Raya University (academic year 2019/2020). Data were collected via an online questionnaire and structured interviews to capture students' responses across variables such as setting, gender, participant, and topic; the study's objective was to describe both how students feel about English and how they actually choose to use it in different contexts. Astuti found that the students demonstrate a generally positive attitude toward English, as reflected in their questionnaire responses and interview statements, and reported patterns in language choice that varied by situational factors (setting, interlocutor, topic) while still showing commitment to learning and using English.

Shahbaz et al. (2018) investigated students' attitudes toward English by measuring the cognitive, emotional and behavioral aspects of attitude among 100 learners drawn from four schools (two private, two public) in the Gujranwala district of Pakistan; data were collected using a standardized attitude questionnaire (reported as Steal's, 2004) and analysed with SPSS. The study's primary objective was to compare attitudes to English between students in public and private school systems and to identify which attitude components (cognitive, affective, behavioral) were stronger. Results indicated that students in private schools demonstrated a more positive overall attitude toward English than their public-school

counterparts, with notable differences appearing across the cognitive and affective dimensions; the authors recommend larger, multi-site studies to confirm and extend these findings.

Orfan (2020) investigated Afghan undergraduate students' attitudes toward learning English, aiming to describe their cognitive, affective, and behavioral attitudes and to test whether those attitudes differed by demographic factors; data were collected via a 30-item close-ended questionnaire from 210 randomly selected undergraduates at Takhar University, and analyzed with SPSS v.26 using descriptive statistics, sample t-tests, and one-way ANOVA. The study found that students overall held positive cognitive, affective, and behavioral attitudes toward learning English and reported no statistically significant attitude differences by gender, age, first language, or field of study though students with internet access and prior English-center experience showed more positive attitudes.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-method research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of Pakistani students' attitudes toward English as a symbol of prestige. A total of 100 undergraduate students (50 from public and 50 from private universities) in Punjab, aged 18-25 years, participated in the study, representing diverse academic disciplines. Using a purposive sampling technique, participants were selected based on their exposure to both English and native languages in academic and social settings. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of Likert-scale items measuring attitudes toward English in relation to social status, identity, education, and employability, and semi-structured interviews with 10 students (five from each institution type) to explore deeper insights into the perceived prestige of English. The data collection took place over four weeks, combining online surveys and interviews conducted via Google Meet and in-person sessions, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages, mean scores, and frequency distributions) through SPSS to identify patterns, while qualitative data were thematically analyzed using Nvivo to uncover recurrent themes related to linguistic prestige, identity, and social mobility.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and used solely for academic purposes. Institutional ethical guidelines were strictly followed throughout the study.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Quantitative Results

The quantitative findings revealed a strong inclination among Pakistani university students to associate English with social prestige, intellectual capital, and upward mobility. Private university students demonstrated consistently higher mean scores across all prestige-related dimensions like social status ($M = 4.4$), education ($M = 4.5$), employability ($M = 4.6$), and power and prestige ($M = 4.5$) than their counterparts in public universities, whose mean scores were 3.9, 4.1, 4.2, and 4.0 respectively.

These findings suggest that exposure to English-medium education, global media, and socially elite circles strengthens students' perceptions of English as a status-enhancing linguistic resource. Private university students often view English proficiency as an index of modernity, professionalism, and global citizenship. Conversely, while public university students also recognized English as a powerful and necessary language, their association with it appeared more instrumental (for exams or jobs) rather than symbolic (as a marker of class or identity).

The results further reveal a socio-linguistic divide in perceptions of cultural identity. Public university students rated their attachment to indigenous languages slightly higher ($M = 2.8$) than private university students ($M = 2.5$). This difference, though modest, indicates that public university students tend to value local languages as integral to cultural belonging, whereas private university students perceive English as a medium of sophistication and prestige, even at the expense of cultural rootedness.

The overall attitude distribution reinforces these findings. Approximately 80% of the respondents expressed positive attitudes toward English (45% strongly positive, 35% moderately positive), while 15% remained neutral and only 5% reported negative attitudes. The overwhelming positivity toward English signifies its hegemonic status within Pakistani linguistic ecology. For many respondents, English was described not only as a “language of communication” but as a “language of aspiration,” symbolizing opportunity, success, and respect in both academic and professional contexts.

The data also suggest that English continues to function as a socioeconomic boundary marker, distinguishing the elite from the middle and lower classes. Private university students, who typically belong to relatively privileged backgrounds, expressed more confidence and comfort using English in both formal and informal settings, reinforcing its role as a linguistic currency in upward mobility.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative analysis of the 10 semi-structured interviews yielded three dominant themes that deepen the understanding of students’ language attitudes:

1. English as Power, Mobility, and Opportunity

Participants overwhelmingly described English as a “gateway to success” and a “language of authority.” Many viewed English proficiency as directly correlated with intelligence, employability, and social respect. One respondent from a private university stated, “You can be talented, but without English, people don’t take you seriously.” Such statements underscore the symbolic function of English as a form of linguistic capital, echoing Bourdieu’s (1991) theory that language functions as a means of gaining social power and legitimacy.

English was also seen as a passport to global participation, students believed that mastery of English allowed them to connect with international communities, access global knowledge, and appear modern and progressive. This perception positions English as both a linguistic necessity and a status marker in Pakistani society.

2. Cultural Dissonance and Identity Conflict

Despite the prestige attached to English, several participants expressed an inner conflict between pride and alienation. Students from public universities particularly voiced discomfort with the cultural cost of prioritizing English. As one participant put it, “We speak English to look educated, but sometimes it feels like we’re losing our real voice.”

This tension highlights the dual identity struggle faced by Pakistani youth: a desire to embrace global modernity while preserving local authenticity. Some participants criticized the perception that speaking English automatically equates to intelligence or sophistication, labeling it a form of linguistic elitism that marginalizes native language speakers.

3. Educational Inequality and Linguistic Insecurity

The third major theme revealed that English symbolizes educational privilege. Private university students described an environment where English proficiency is normalized and celebrated, while public

university students expressed feelings of linguistic insecurity and inferiority when interacting in English. This aligns with Rahman's (2002) argument that English-medium education perpetuates class-based segregation in Pakistan.

Public university students mentioned their reliance on translation and code-switching to cope with academic texts and social interactions in English, whereas private university students viewed English as an effortless communicative medium. This disparity contributes to a linguistic hierarchy where proficiency becomes a gatekeeper for social and professional advancement.

DISCUSSION

The findings strongly affirm that English continues to function as a symbol of prestige, power, and privilege in Pakistan's sociolinguistic landscape. The results are consistent with the theoretical framework of linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) and language ideology (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994), which explain how certain languages acquire symbolic value through institutional, educational, and social reinforcement.

The dominance of English as a prestige language reflects Pakistan's colonial linguistic legacy, where English was historically associated with governance, education, and elite culture. Despite the spread of Urdu and regional languages, English retains its symbolic dominance due to its association with global connectivity and modernization.

The contrast between public and private university students underscores a systemic inequality in linguistic exposure and opportunity. Private institutions often promote English as the default language of success, producing students with higher self-confidence and access to elite jobs. Public university students, though equally ambitious, face structural barriers that limit their linguistic capital.

This linguistic disparity reinforces social stratification, where English proficiency becomes a marker of both educational privilege and class identity. It perpetuates the notion that English speakers belong to a higher intellectual and social tier, marginalizing those more proficient in indigenous languages.

Moreover, the study's qualitative findings highlight a cultural paradox: while students value English for its global utility, they also express nostalgia and guilt over linguistic alienation. This tension suggests a hybrid linguistic identity, where Pakistani youth navigate between global aspirations and local cultural belonging.

Ultimately, these findings call for inclusive language policies in education that promote multilingualism rather than linguistic hegemony. Empowering indigenous languages alongside English can foster cultural pride and linguistic equity, bridging the socioeconomic and educational divide that English currently amplifies.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the attitudes of Pakistani university students toward English as a language associated with prestige, power, and upward social mobility. The findings revealed that English continues to occupy a privileged position in Pakistan's linguistic hierarchy, functioning not only as a medium of education and global communication but also as a marker of social class and identity. Students generally perceive proficiency in English as a pathway to professional success, higher education opportunities, and social recognition. However, their perceptions and usage patterns are significantly influenced by their socioeconomic and linguistic backgrounds, with students from urban and English-medium institutions showing more favorable attitudes than those from rural or vernacular-medium settings.

The study underscores that English in Pakistan is more than a language, it symbolizes aspiration, modernity, and access to elite domains of power. Yet, this symbolic capital also perpetuates linguistic inequalities and marginalization of local languages. Therefore, while English remains a tool for empowerment and global integration, it simultaneously reinforces socio-linguistic divisions within the country. Policymakers and educators should aim to promote bilingual or multilingual competence, valuing indigenous languages alongside English to foster linguistic equity and cultural inclusivity.

In sum, English as a symbol of prestige in Pakistan reflects both opportunity and inequality—a complex sociolinguistic phenomenon that continues to shape the educational and social identities of Pakistani youth.

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