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## Developing a Social Critique of Hegemony of English

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### Abstract

The *language pyramid* in the post-colonial territories as propounded by Melchers and Shaw in 2003 aptly reflects on the status of different languages in Pakistan. At the top is English, with its heritage as a colonial language. Then is the ‘national’ language Urdu which has nationalist value and is spoken by the majority as a lingua franca; while at the bottom of this hierarchy are the regional languages and their dialects. This hierarchy of languages has deeper repercussions enrooting stratification based on social class and commodification of languages. In this paper, this claim is substantiated by semiotic analysis of a social media text– an amateur video clip that went viral on Facebook in January 2021– in which owners of a high-end cafe in Islamabad mock their manager’s English. The video is only the tip of the iceberg of the symbolic and linguistic capitals of English in Pakistan. This analysis is further pleaded by the literature on the critical approach to language policy and planning (LPP). This critical approach can be traced back to the 1980s and Tollefson’s oft-cited book in 1991 that endeavors to situate LPP as a part of ongoing conflicts between the elites and the common masses. He regards that the evolution of the critical approach has widened its scope rendering it primarily sociocultural, dealing with the dynamics of status and prestige. Thus stated, this research attempts to converge the critical relational theory of Bourdieu with semiotics to address this issue of class discrimination based on the hegemony of English in Pakistan through a multimethodological approach.

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### Introduction

Pakistan emerged as a separate homeland in 1947 after the British colonization era ended in this region. Initially, there were five provinces- The East province Bengal, also called East Pakistan, was situated miles away from the West wing of Pakistan– comprising of four other provinces: Baluchistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, and Sindh. The history of Language Policy and Planning (LPP) in Pakistan is patent with turbulence because there was a constant avowal of preserving the status of Urdu, declared as the sole national language in 1948; spreading discontent in Bengal (East Pakistan). Being the largest province at that time, Bengal desired its regional language (Bengali) to be given that status. This was one of the many other reasons that instigated the conflict and alienated this East wing from West Pakistan, finally leading to the split of the country and the formation of an independent state Bangladesh in 1972.

The language policy as stated in Article 251 of the Constitution of Pakistan, 1973 is:

1. The national language of Pakistan is Urdu, and arrangements shall be made for it being used for official and other purposes within 15 years from the commencing day.
2. The English language may be used for official purposes until arrangements are made for its replacement by Urdu.

Yet, the English language stays the (co)official language of Pakistan to date, in practice. Figure 1 shows the ‘language pyramid’ (Melchers and Shaw, 2003, p. 128) of the situation in the post-colonial territories aptly reflects on the hierarchy of languages in this multilingual country.



Figure 1. Melchers & Shaw, 2003

At the top is English, with its heritage as a colonial language and status as the language of the bureaucracy and military—the cream. A ‘national’ language Urdu has nationalist value and is spoken by the majority, in all the provinces, as a lingua Franca. Although it is the mother tongue or first language of only around 8% of the country's population (Rahman, 2011), nevertheless it's the link language between the people of indigenous linguistic background and is also the medium of instruction (MoI) in educational institutes, particularly in the public schools (Javed, 2017). Urdu represents the national identity of the people of Pakistan (Manan & David, 2014) and is perceived as a vehicle for creating nationalist harmony and unification among people of diverse ethnicity (Abbas et al., 2018). Whereas, at the bottom of this pyramid are the provincial languages which have several dialects and variations.

In the same vein, Tauli (1974) classified languages as per their efficiency evaluated from the economic perspective. Tauli considered *ethnic languages* as inefficient terming them primal, antiquated, and may not have been developed “methodologically according to plan” (pg. 51). Such assertions revealed a ladder of languages for language planning – placing well-planned languages, like colonial languages, on the uppermost rung and indigenous languages at the bottom (Johnson & Ricento, 2013).

These are critical questions related to the power dynamics related to the status of languages that exist between different levels of social structures: macro to micro. The assumption underlying this paper is that the hierarchy of languages can have deeper repercussions enrooting stratification based on social class and market-worth of different languages. This paper is broadly organized in two sections: the first establishes the critical approaches to language policy and planning (LPP), and the second segment introduces semiotics. The nexus between the

two sections is paved through semiotic analysis (SA) of a short social media text, followed by the discussion and synthesis. The research employs a multimethod approach of qualitative domain: the review is based on the literature utilizing a systematic scoping method, later complemented by the semiotic analysis of a case/use example.

## **Language Policy and Planning—An Overview**

Language policy and planning emerged as a term to address the issue of language priority in a non-standardized speech population where multiple languages exist. The early period of language planning, which emerged in the 1960s during the post-World War II, has been labeled as *classic language planning* (see, Ricento, 2000, p. 206) marked by the development of widely used research frameworks and institutionalization of language planning discipline in the form of projects, publications and conferences. Kaplan (1994) define language planning as a collection of ideologies, principles, policy discussion, changes in rules, and practices that are expected to attain a shift in planning in the use of language in one or more groups Nekvapil (2011). Baldauf (2012) presents an overview of the fundamentals of language planning: status planning, corpus planning, prestige planning, language-in-education planning, and critical approaches to language planning explaining language planning as a methodological, future-driven change in language code.

*Status planning* refers to the formal propagation of one or more languages by national or international governing organizations such as the British Council's PEELI, and US-funded Micro Access English language programs in Pakistan, for reference. Status planning involves the 'privileging' of a language variety, typically as a written standard. In the context of Pakistani academics, this status has long been conferred to the standard BBC English, yet the Information Technology industry has also popularized Americanized variety now. As stated earlier in the introduction, *prestige* has been associated with English and then Urdu as a second language that may conflict with the regional languages due to the communities' sense of identity at the micro-level. Whereas *Corpus planning* deals with the development of the form of a language including linguistic features such as standardization and graphization. It also includes the preservation of language. Cooper's (1989) view of language planning became significant as he introduced the term "acquisition planning" adding to corpus and status planning, by which he made language planning relevant to language-in-education planning (Nekvapil, 2011).

The focus on language planning also grew with the shift of interest in linguistics, in which issues of language and society emerged into the foreground, leading to the formation of *sociolinguistics* as a discipline.

Ricento (2000, p. 199–200) characterizes early LPP scholarship as follows: Foremost, the objectives of language planning were often about aspirations for regional, national, religious, or other forms of social integration, a desire for modernization, efficiency, or a desire for democratization. Secondly, language was perceived as a valuable resource that required planning.

This brief overview of the goals associated with the development of LPP as a discipline raises certain concerns about the issues of language planning: have the overtly stated goals of unification and democratization of

linguistic resources been realized by the language planning processes? Or the social divide, based on linguistic hierarchy, has further been aggravated by the covert agendas? Such questions gave birth to the critical strand, primarily sociolinguistic in its core, dealing with the dynamics of status and prestige of languages.

### **Situating Critical Approach to Language Planning**

At the end of the 1980s, the critical stance to LPP emerged as a product of research on critical aspects of languages in social life, such as the development of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and the critical approaches to literacy. The key turn in social theory, critical theory, poststructuralist and postmodern philosophy (e.g. Bourdieu 1977) was primarily concerned with how language and literacy play role in the (re)construction of power relations and disparity in the society. Tollefson's oft-cited research (1991) further contributed to this critical stance by situating LPP in terms of class conflict– the continuous struggle between the elites and the masses around capitalization over political power, social, and cultural, and economic resources (Cabral& Jones 2021). The critical movement in linguistics and sociolinguistics influenced the field of language planning finally leading to the development of critical language policy in the 1990s. The growing awareness that early LPP models were insufficient formed the basis of critical analyses (e.g. Tollefson 1986, 1991) that centered on the ideological tendencies and sociopolitical influence of language policies. The breakthrough within the LPP field originated with the introduction of the historical-structural approach to language policy (Tollefson 1991, 2002) criticizing the traditional perspective of language planning as the deliberate efforts to affect the future of languages; and language policy as planning by the state neither integrating the *ideological basis* of language policy nor considering the historical-structural processes that shape language and policies. He contends that language policy should be specified as the *institutionalization of language* as a foundation for social stratification and class distinction (1991, p. 16). This perspective provides understandings of how educational language policy structures disparate social and economic relations. Tollefson (2006) pronounces the goals of *critical language policy* that: (1) it critiques conventional views of LPP recognizing that policies often generate and perpetuate social inequality and that policy-makers often vest in the interests of dominant social groups (2) it seeks democratization and equality of languages through policies; and (3) it is influenced by critical theory.

Once considered to be marginal to LPP scholarship, critical approaches have become central to some of the most productive research area. Pérez-Milans and Tollefson (2018) recognize critical approaches as offering useful analyses of some of the most important processes in LPP today: English under globalization, language commodification, linguistic governmentality, and class and inequality. Tollefson (2013) recommended that with the development in critical approaches, LPP scholarship now deals with how economic disparity and macro policies influence the life opportunities for the low and working-class people; and also how it is more generally sociocultural, dealing with the issues of *status and prestige*. Critical LPP, hence, advanced from a concern with economic resources redistribution to regard and appreciation for sociocultural diversity in growing multiracial and multicultural societies. This implies a new perspective on what can be called *identity politics*. This trending perspective in LPP researchers has engaged mainly on social issues around *ethnolinguistic identity*, and wider concerns on global issues such as *ethnonational* struggles (Block & Corona, 2019). Considering the sensitive yet provoking questions that the critical stance to LPP addresses, a domain of scholarship recognizes the field of

LPP as exposing and (re)generating class, race, language, and power (McCarty, 2013).

## **Critical Social Theory and Language**

The same critical questions have been conceptualized in Bourdieu's social theory concerning languages and education. This section endeavors to understand symbolic power associated with the status of languages from a Bourdieusian perspective. Following Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), cited in Heller and Martin-Jones (2001:6), education is understood as a key site because of its possibilities for the construction and application of processes of symbolic domination. Bourdieu (1997) recognizes four broad types of capital: Economic capital includes physical resources that can be liquidated into cash; social capital involves the possession of a dependable social network or a group membership, and cultural capital— concerning education and language. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977: p. 74) introduce the term “linguistic capital” as a complementary form of cultural capital. Bourdieu's fourth form is, symbolic capital, perceived as added honor or prestige. Symbolic capital originates out of the other forms of capital when accepted as legitimate (1987). In Bourdieu's point of view, when a language is declared official language, it is situated as a legitimate language conferred with symbolic capital. “The official language is bound up with the state, both in its genesis and in its social uses. ....conditions are created for the constitution of a unified linguistic market, led by the official language” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 45) adding, that all linguistic practices are assessed against legitimate practices, e.g., those of the dominant group.

### **Symbolic Power of Language: a Scoping Review**

Developed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), scoping reviews can assemble a variety of types of literature and serve as a method of gathering information systematically, sifting through the irrelevant data while maintaining a focused stance. A scoping review was conducted to address the key question at the backdrop of this study:

- how symbolic power associated with certain languages in the society can cause and perpetuate stratification based on social class and commodification of languages.

It questions the role of language policies in education that may covertly be serving the interest of dominant groups within societies when analyzed outside what policy texts state- in the real practices of the society. This debate also sheds light on the role of schools in society and the links between education and employment. This question is analyzed with the help of a scoping review of the recent years' papers, applying the Bourdieusian perspective of Language Policy and Planning (LPP). This study employs major databases including Springer Link, Taylor & Francis Online. To ensure that no relevant studies were left out, Google Scholar and Google were also used in the data collection process.

The scoping review entails an iterative search process. First, “Bourdieu and Language” was used as the keyword. However, the results did not show a clear relevance to the question. The keyword was changed to “Bourdieu and Language Policy and Planning”, after screening the title and abstract of the results, studies irrelevant to Bourdieu's social theory were excluded.

This section has reviewed articles from the database from 2015 to 2020 only. The reason for choosing this period is that the study focusses on the recent academic trends in LPP from the linguistic market’s perspective. The data thus yielded is charted in Table 1.

**Table 1: Scoping Review on Bourdieu and LPP**

❑ Databases: Springer Link, Tayler& Francis Online, and Google Scholar		
❑ Custom Date: 2015- 2020		
Author and Date	Context	Key Finding(s)
Heng & Silver, 2016	Singapore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quadrilingual policy- mother tongue (Indian/Malay/Chinese) +English</li> <li>• The greatest linguistic capital is English + Mandarin.</li> </ul>
Hamid, 2016	Bangladesh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The marketization</i> of education in which actors pursue either economic capital by investing in linguistic capital i.e English.</li> </ul>
Sah, 2020	Schools in Nepal, India & Pakistan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to quality English skills is linked with students’ socioeconomic status.</li> </ul>
Kalyanpur, 2020	India	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fluency in English and the “right” accent are markers of social status as capital.</li> </ul>
Hewson, 2018	Vietnam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pre 2008, French language was regarded as capital.</li> <li>• Now education commodification through marketization of ESL industry in modern era.</li> </ul>
Bui et al., 2019	Vietnamese University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to language at school manifests larger systems of power relations and access to social success in and out of school.</li> </ul>
Akua, 2016	Somali women in the UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English proficiency is required to enter employment and play the game.</li> </ul>

The review of these papers highlighted the fundamentals of Bourdieu's social theory that help in the perception of language as a commodity, a valuable component of the cultural capital and that can be transformed into other forms of capital like economic capital, for instance. Hewson (2018) employed Bourdieu’s framework in his analysis of how the commodification of ESL (English as a Second Language) education influences education quality in Vietnam. The article investigates how some forms of capital have become linked with western culture and skin color. The data consists of semi-structured interviews with ESL teachers from native English-speaking countries working in Ho Chi Minh.

The context is that the private education industry is supported by the Vietnamese parents, from the upper and middle classes, who can depend on their cultural capital therefore the ESL companies’ priority is to cater to these parents. Usually, credentials and skills are not prioritized in the ESL industry; rather market demand determines the hiring and thus most centers end up employing a native speaker ‘regardless of qualification’

(Nguyen 2012, p. 263). Parents invest in a service that teachers may not have the expertise to impart. The global capitalism and market demand for native English variety have rendered it an esteemed commodity status attaching value to the accents and attributes that local teachers do not possess. Such pronunciations, accent, grammar, and vocabulary, embodied in the individual, typical of a class or region constitute 'linguistic capital' that is redeliverable in the market (Bourdieu, 1986, p.84).

What is mainly significant about this research in Vietnam is the role played by market demand, determined by parents as customers, in preserving and favoring a certain kind of linguistic capital and its association with nativity and with 'white': the skin color. Concerning financial factors, Bourdieu's views frame Bui et al (2019) study to examine whether family capital and loan policies could affect higher education impartiality as *symbolic power* at a Northwest Vietnam University. The study focuses on ways in which practices within educational and other social institutions reflect educational inequality and broader social and political agendas.

The study bases its claims on Bourdieu's conception that different types of capital are interlinked and transferable and Bourdieu's presentation of schools as *a field* where social capitals crisscross and determine one's success or failure. Their capital determines the extent to which one could procure language and literacy at educational institutions demonstrating the larger systems of power relations in school and society. The financial support provided in the form of loans will add in their capital and support the marginalized students to access higher education opportunities.

The language challenges faced by the uneducated immigrants in the UK, who lack the cultural capital to enter the mainstream and amalgamate in the dominant culture of Britain, are analyzed by Akua's (2016) construction on Bourdieu's debate on education as symbolic capital. The constraints behind the desire to acquire English proficiency and education, leading to employment to be able to steer through the elite socio-cultural economy, are analyzed by presenting the case of resettled Somali refugee women. Thus, English as a linguistic capital is aspired by the class-less refugees who otherwise, do not possess the cultural capital to play the 'game'.

Power dynamics, language shift, and maintenance and policies and their inconsistencies are explored in the context of Singapore (Bokhorst-Heng and Silver, 2017) exploiting Bourdieu's metaphor of *field* to explain the gap between fixed quadrilingual state policy and the reality of implementation. Despite the proclamations that the four official languages—English, Mandarin, Malay, Indian— are promoted equally, English is majorly deemed to be 'first among equals' (Stroud and Wee, 2011, p.50). Moreover, it is Mandarin + English bilingualism that is seen as vested with the greatest capital. Thus, the linguistic capital of English and Mandarin can be transferred into other forms of capital such as education and employment. It becomes imperative to adopt a critical view of LPP when one recognizes the social and political enrooting of languages from a Bourdieusian lens reflecting on their efficiency and status.

Another research, drawing on Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital and market presents disparity in language proficiency connected with different education markets in Bangladesh (Hamid, 2016). Since Bangladesh is also a South Asian post-colonial state, that was a part of Pakistan till 1971, this analysis is particularly relatable to



the Pakistani background too.

The paper develops an interpretation of English as a commodity, language proficiency linguistic capital, learning English as an investment of capital while teaching it as a profitable activity, and explains the linguistic market as the field where the commodification of languages takes place. The value of the linguistic product is set, besides other considerations, by (a) the field where linguistic trade occurs; (b) the social positioning of the trader; and (c) the institutional or social authority affiliated with the linguistic product from where it was procured.

The disparity in the linguistic market, reported in this article, addresses language policies that are supported by “linguistic communism” (Bourdieu, 1991; Hamid 2010) –implicating that education is free and is available to all (Hamid, 2010). It suggests that anyone can take benefit to ensure his move-up in society by *capitalizing on English language skills*. Accessing the demand or supply of the market ensures the access and subsistence of those holding the greatest capital. Holborow (1999, as cited by Hamid, 2016) contends that English can be the reforming solution, hope, or the oppressor, depending on your status in the society.

As far as MoI controversy is concerned, English medium instruction (EMI) is generally considered the key for academic excellence in multilingual South Asian schools: including India, Pakistan, and Nepal. Sah (2020) critiques EMI policies and practices borrowing the Bourdieusian notions of ‘linguistic capital’ and ‘linguistic marketplace,’ to explain the ideological and educational inspiration behind EMI. The endorsement of English in language policy is largely tied to its perception as a vehicle to high social positioning, quality education, and empowerment. This symbolic acknowledgment of English to the developmental goals of the agents and the government is reinforced by its standing as a worldwide language, which is negotiated via neoliberalism—presented as a new form of capital and in the free-market economy. In Bourdieu’s words, English has acquired a ‘symbolic capital’ which people hope to enter the macroeconomy via EMI.

Findings have revealed that students from the elite English medium private schools do well academically, as recounted in Haider (2017). This perception has overpowered the educational culture in the society leading to the mushroom growth of low-cost EMI schools that accommodate children of lower socioeconomic families. Erling et al.’s (2016) analysis on language policies in Ghana and India contributes to the study by adding that the view of English as a linguistic capital is the main reason behind the massive relocation of rural and underprivileged kids from public schools to low-fee private EMI schools. Jeon (2012), while reflecting the status of EMI in Korea, observes and conforms that admittance to quality English skills is closely linked with students’ social class. This view reinforces that social distinction and educational inequities are perpetuated by EMI policy, which requires policymakers to re-assess their language ideologies and re-consider ground realities critically before propagating EMI policies.

In the context of post-colonial India, Kalyanpur (2020) evaluated the cultural elitism existing in educational domains that maintain social discrimination by the preference of a particular type of knowledge or cultural capital over the expertise of less privileged social groups. This hierarchy is revealed and disseminated through

the language preference as an MoI, that benefits certain groups who may already have access to these privileges, assisting their academic success even additionally, while persisting to marginalize those who lack access to this capital. The study focuses on the case of the lowest caste Indians called *Dalits*, who have conventionally been denied education (Mukhopadhyay & Sriprakash, 2011) thus reproducing the same social structure.

Till the 1990s, private schools were still the stronghold of the elite in India. However, economic reforms in the early 1990s triggered investment in private schools that resulted in a large number of low-fee-paying (LFP) private EMI institutions. Though the goal was to increase educational access for low strata students, LFP schools have resulted in perpetuating social inequities capitalizing on parents' ambitions for a better future for their children through fluency in English (Kalia & Reese, 2009). These students from low socio-economic backgrounds have inadequate exposure to English in their daily routines. Kalyanpur's views complement Hewson's (2018) findings that reflect on the cultures where the *right* accent, pronunciation, and fluency in English are the symbols of social status, and less valued variety of "world Englishes", becomes impeding to upward social mobility (Motha, 2014).

### Summary

Regarding the status of English and EMI in Pakistan, these entities also hold hefty capital in the linguistic market. Manan et al. (2016) support this view that English is perceived as a permit to better employment and social rise in Pakistan. In a society pigeon-holed by penetrating class consciousness, parents from the lower or working-class desire to enroll their children in EMI schools. Quality EMI schooling, due to associated elitism remains the accessible resource for a few only, with adequate capital to invest in the EMI education. Drawing relevance from the literature cited above, there emerge common patterns associated with the status of languages in multilingual settings in general and the societies where English language instruction is viewed as a symbolic vehicle of power. Furthermore, the review surfaced the added features that render prestige and value to a particular variety of English – native-like accents, pronunciation, and fluency over the other the lesser prized varieties of Englishes and sometimes just the nativeness takes edge over qualifications in certain EMI/ESL industries.

### Semiotics and Language Policy

As claimed at the onset, the second part of this paper endeavors at establishing a nexus between semiotics and LPP using a case example as a vehicle to explore the "perlocutionary effects of representationally complex communications", particularly leading to *societal consequences* (Mikhaeil & Baskerville, 2019). This communication event in this case is an amateur Facebook video, the societal reaction to which highlighted the complex issues related to the status of languages in Pakistan and connecting it to the critical approach of language planning— employing Bourdieusian lens particularly reviewed in the literature earlier in this paper. There have been scholarships that have attempted to establish a link between various aspects of Bourdieu's theory and semiotics (see Schinkel & Tacq, 2004; Robertson, 2011) setting a legitimate schema for the conceptual framework of this paper.

The review has highlighted the concern how the status of different languages in a particular speech community affects the value in its linguistic market, there are particular global and macro-level policies and planning that play their part in determining the future of certain languages in a particular socio-cultural surrounding. This article is an attempt to give semiotic foundation to language policy studies and issues related to it in the Pakistani society by presenting a case example. Language policies reveal ideological processes. Their analysis unfolds the reality experiences or *semiotic affordances* relevant to certain sociocultural contexts.

This concept of policy texts reveals the ideological foundations of the forms that they create and encode, project, enact, and implement language features like power, status, through projective texts produced to define the contexts of their performances (New CFP: Language and Semiotic Studies, 2020).

### **Sign and Semiotics**

We all are the readers of signs. We draw meanings from different forms present around us which are more exactly known as signs or symbols. The “signifier” and “signified” are the two inseparable sides of a sign at first brought in by the Swiss linguist/ semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure where the signifier is the image of an object projected in the mind and what it refers to is the signified i.e. the mental form of the signifier.

He laid the foundations of Semiology- he coined this word to describe a new science of the study of signs “as part of social life” (1983, pg. 15) and applying the rules that govern this science to the study of linguistics. He introduced the notion of a “linguistic sign.....a two-sided psychological entity” where the words of a language and the concept/meaning of it are interlinked and “each triggers the other” (1983, pg. 66), and the relationship between the two is *arbitrary*. Thus, the sign is the basic unit that makes a language, otherwise without meaning; words are no more than just a noise (Culler 1988). Yet, linguistics had to be only one of the offshoots of semiotics: it’s a vast field of knowledge applied to the study of an assemblage of signs existing in human social activity. What is culture? What is language or music? Semiotics gives a new perspective at looking at their definitions in terms of signs. Every sign communicates a meaning and every form of communication is a language.

### **Peirce’s Classification of Signs**

Charles Sanders Peirce presented the theory of trichotomy of signs (Peirce and Buchler 1955, pg. 114) stating that a sign can be an index, an icon, or a symbol or all of them depending on the nature of the function of sign. A sign is an index-as the name itself states- if it refers to the position of something where it is located. It can be a physical gesture e.g. pointing a finger towards something/ person or it can be some word performing the indexing function (Danesi 1999, p. 32). A sign would be an icon if it imitates or replicates the properties of its referent. An indexical sign is connected physically with its referent/ object while a symbol is connected conceptually ‘by virtue of the idea of the symbol-using mind’ (Pierce and Buchler 1955, pg. 114) with the object. From here springs Pierce’s declaration that we only think in terms of signs. He, however, ascertained that there was no hard and fast compartmentalization between the forms of signs: any sign could be an index and a symbol, or an icon and a symbol at the same time.

### **Sign Codes and Structuralism**

Semiotics is one of the modern approaches applied to the study of the language, be that of literature or cultures or any other discourse event. Pierre Guiraud (1975, p. 24 as cited in Chandler, n.d) notes that the signification of a sign is more or less codified: involving certain codes or conventions that should be understood to arrive at the meaning of that sign. In other words, the relationship between a sign and its referent-what the sign stands for- is codified according to certain social and historic conventions and it requires decoding to get the message sent by the encoder/sender. Every text is a system /an assemblage of signs organized according to codes and sub-codes which reveal certain values, beliefs, norms, and practices. Reading a text, be it a cultural event, media episode, or simple everyday act of reading the traffic signals, is a process of decoding these signs- both literal and social- for the purpose of comprehension.

The study of these relations or conventions-more technically called *codes*- is called structuralism. Semiology and structuralism are 'inseparable' (Culler 2002, p. 5) since the study of signs leads to the study of the sign codes according to which they are arranged to form a mode of communication. These influences have carried semiotics from linguistics into anthropology, literary and mass media studies, visual studies as well as human sciences (see Kull, 1999 for example) that is a modern approach, not been given due recognition as such.

### **Semiotics Applied to Media**

In this section, the primary concern is on how semiotics can be applied to social media content. The term 'media' also includes social media platforms besides other communication media like magazines, cinema, radio, newspapers, television, and the like. These communications media convey a wide variety of messages and meanings and to a majority of our experience of the society involves interaction with media. Barthes (1957) introduced studying media in terms of how they create meanings projecting media events as myths or rituals due to presupposed underlying shared codes or patterns. Semiotic analysis (SA) of media content presumes an in-depth knowledge of the initiating culture. Burgelin (1972, p. 19) claims that the mass media do not create an independent culture of their own but are a segment of the culture from which they originate. Semiotics provides us with an approach to assist in establishing the 'cultural meaning' of media content. These days, signs have become transitory or temporary in the internet media where they are used, coded, and recoded by whoever, wherever, and however, and also trigger an instantaneous public reaction in the form of comments, likes, and dislikes, and counter posts. Though SA is recognized as a whole research methodology (Mingers & Willcocks, 2017), it can be adapted and can be used in alignment and combination with other methodologies such as ethnography, case study, etc. Earlier it has been extensively regarded as an analytical tool though, yet scarcely employed. While Mingers and Willcocks signify the application of semiotics for the analysis of social media, its fundamental signification lies as an analytical lens rather than a whole methodology. Recently, the semiotic approach has emerged as one of the most prevailing ways of understanding media (Myers, 2013; Mikhaeil & Baskerville, 2019).

In keeping with the objective of this study, I will be exploring one media episode in particular, namely an

amateur Facebook video content. It will follow briefly on the semiotic power of the viewers that gives meaning to the totality of social media communication.

### **Researchers' Positionality in SA**

The researcher's sensemaking becomes a part of the whole of the communication act through his positionality as the interpreter of the signs. Investigating semiotics raises our understanding of the role of the sign systems and our own position in creating our sense of reality. In this way, the researcher becomes a tool whose sensemaking process requires attention—a perception of how the researcher's positionality within the social context may influence the analysis (Weick, 1995). Thus semiotic analytical tool broadens that effort by rationalizing the social context of the events and the researcher's background and situation, to explain how the researcher may have incorporated his/her own understanding into the analysis of the message. (Mikhaeil & Baskerville, 2019)

### *The Case*

The grounds for this social critique on the hegemony of languages in Pakistani society is set by presenting a case example of a social media text – On 21st January 2021, a Facebook video went viral in Pakistan and beyond, in which the owners of a high-end café in Islamabad were mocking the English proficiency of their manager. This one-minute-and-18-second video of Cannoli by Café Soul is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M3y6ajNLdBE>

The women first introduce themselves as Uzma and Dia - owners of Cannoli by Cafe Soul in Islamabad. . They present the manager of their café whose name is Awais, with whom the conversation about his English language proficiency precedes because they wanted a break from *boredom*. The verbatim of the footage is as follows:

Uzma and Dia, "We own Cannoli, and we were bored".

"Awais, here's our manager."

Awais. "Hi!"

"Dia, would you like to ask Awais some questions?" says Uzma

"Awais, how long have you been working here?"

"I um.. think for the last nine years".

"Nine years?" Ask the women.

"Yes"

"Awais was our first hires when we opened café Soul."

"How many classes of English have you taken for English?"

"I think three."

"Three years you mean?" Dia says.

"No, no, three classes, six months one class," says Awais.

"Six months, one class? so a year and a half you studied English?"

"Yes".

"So could you please speak to everyone in English and say a sentence?" Dia.

“Introduce yourself”, says Uzma

“Hi, my name is Awais Aftab and me...job their manager.....that's it”.

”Shabash!” ( Urdu expression for bravo )Uzma says. They laugh.

”So, this is our manager who has been with us for nine years. And this is the *beautiful* English he speaks.

This is what we paid for... and a very good salary, mind you. Thank you”.

A small-scale research was conducted on the internet content to gauge the impact and reaction by the public to this video, post its appearance on social media. Initially, the search “Cannoli Islamabad viral video /Cannoli Islamabad incident”, yielded about 160,000 results including videos, newsfeed, images, etc. out of which 6,040 were videos. The search indicated that it had been viewed over 0.86 million times on Twitter-the microblogging platform within twenty-four hours of its post. The criteria for inclusion was specified for the Google search engine to be able to extract relevant sample content to meet the objective of estimating the societal response to this video that becomes an important part of the whole communicative act. The parameters in terms of date were set between 21st January to 25th January 2021; content focus was only *newsfeeds* that yielded 67 results, that were initially filtered to 57 with relevance to the keywords and eventually 17 news were sifted based on their title containing the search keywords. The criteria thus restricted and examined, some of the posts seemed repetitive of the same theme in different words. For sample, the headlines of some news content are stated here:

- #BoycottCannoli: Islamabad restaurant owners say they are 'appalled' at reaction over video
- Urdu Mushaira (poetry recital)held against #CannoliOwners outside Islamabad café
- #Cannoli – Islamabad café rebrands its logo after facing severe backlash over viral video

To summarize the societal reaction to this post, it was reported that hundreds of Twitter users slammed the cafe owners as "elitist", and "reeking of privilege". The video clip triggered rage among the netizens about the conflicting status of English and the national language. The owners faced severe criticism on social media after the video went viral and #BoycottCannoli was witnessed as one of the top trends on social media in Pakistan, forcing the owners of the Cannoli by Cafe Soul restaurant to share a written apology over their action. Moreover, it triggered the debate on the social media platforms and newsfeed between Urdu-the national language and English- as a colonial memento. Later, the restaurant logo was also rebranded by the owners, adding Urdu script in it (see Figure 2), in an effort to appease the masses manifesting the placement of both languages on the same status.



Figure 1. The Rebranded Logo of the Cafe

*Metonymy and Metaphor*

Johnson and Lakoff (1980) have asserted that a large part of our everyday language is either metonymies or metaphors. They define the notion of metaphor that it's all conceptual and that the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another. It collaborates with Peirce's definition of a symbol as mentioned in his trichotomy of signs, as discussed earlier, so a symbol is a metaphor (or vice versa) and both are conceptual entities. It establishes the contention that metaphorical language is not the sole domain of the poetic texts only. They are the symbolic means of bringing unrelated terms into relation. Lakoff and Johnson (1980, Ch. 8), metonymy, like metaphor, is a part of our everyday thinking, embedded in our experience, is subject to general and logical principles, and shapes our thoughts and actions. Lakoff and Johnson give the example of the metonymy in the expression *she's just a pretty face*- a part representing a whole or vice versa.

As per the theory stated above, most of our language is metaphoric/ symbolic and therefore latent with diverse interpretations not stated straightforwardly. In this case, the café stands as a metonym of Islamabad– Islamabad is the capital of Pakistan, and as such is not a part of any province, so doesn't represent any particular ethnic or provincial origin, rather represents Pakistani society and its culture in general. The restaurant décor, ambiance, light western music at the backdrop, the owners' anglicized dresses, their language proficiency are all signs representing their socio-economic class. While the manager and his demeanor, on the other hand, metonymize the working-class with his limited resources trying to achieve English proficiency. He has invested time and money, in three courses for one and a half years, to be able to attain some staggering spoken English skills. The desired level of competence in the English language and fluency is still hasn't been acquired and he faces subjugation due to his level of language skills in this particular episode, which is indicative of the larger power relationships in the society. Reading the signs in their proper context, the intentions of the transmitter behind the message, how it is decoded by the audience, and what inference it brings, in the end, contribute to the totality of the communication act. Any sign can have a denotational meaning and may also trigger connotational signification associated with it where 'denotation' is the first layer of signification that is the 'literal', or commonly perceived meaning of a sign – usually provided by the dictionary for the linguistic signs and by the general audience perception for the representative visual signs or images (Panofsky 1970, p. 51-3)

The second level of signification 'connotation' is a term used to refer to the socio-cultural and personal, emotional, and ideological associations of the sign, subjective to the decoder's ethnicity, class, gender, and so on, (Chandler, n.d). On the denotation level, English is just a language or an official or foreign language in a broader Pakistani context. Yet, this notion can evoke a continuous semiosis– production of meaning related to a sign– each viewer of this sign can interpret it in relation to his personal associations in addition to its general contextual significance. In general, as a pattern, English (language) stands for elitism, finesse, high social status, expensive education linked to EMI in Pakistani sociocultural settings ( see Mansoor, 2005; Rahman 1997, 2005, 2010). This connotes the association of a language with a certain class and education system behind it too, represented by the café owners in this case. Moreover, the owners' remark about the manager's salary viz a viz his English proficiency is also significant, '*what we paid for... and a very good salary*' connoting his English

isn't worth what he is being paid for: the economic relationship of English proficiency in the market as a profit-oriented skill or vice versa. In this scenario, his nine years' service and loyalty aren't weighed against his salary but rather the (spoken) English skills to be precise.

The communication between the transmitter of the information and the receiver of it depends on the context of the communication act. The most important stage in the comprehension of the message is the moment of the interlocutor/the receiver/ the decoder of the message where the results of a text are affected by the subjective responses of the reader (Wimsett, 1954). In this instance, the researcher becomes the principal decoder, who views the footage and signs contained in it, in relation to its societal reaction and situates the whole episode as a case of linguistic hegemony of English.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The review of the literature using Bourdieu's notions of linguistic capital and market converges on the claim that certain languages in certain communities have higher prospects of profit due to their association with high culture and class. This contention about the situation of language status in the Pakistani context is presented and then validated by the SA of visual and material signs contained in a media episode, that itself becomes representationally complex due to its consequential impact on the audience—essentially contributing to the interpretation of the whole communicative act in relation to the socio-cultural context of Pakistan.

The semiotic analysis of this media text has raised two important dynamics: the proficiency in English as a status symbol: the westernized dominant group represented by the owners of the café and the working class striving to achieve this skill or linguistic capital in the Bourdieusian term. Secondly, the semiotic power of the audience: the popular masses' rejection of this hegemony of a language— that is *firangi*: foreign, in the form of social media reaction- trolls, memes and then organizing an Urdu *mushaira* (poetry recital) in front of the restaurant projecting its significance as an emblem of national integration and their allegiance to it. This representational struggle between the social groups or classes endorses the metaphor or symbol of the *field* or of a 'game' for the field where participants, agents, and actors play their part (Robertson, 2011).

This convergence of the perspectives is witnessed in Schinkel, & Tacq (2004) exploring Saussure's influence on Bourdieu's relational reasoning particularly in reference to his book, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, as reflected in its title and subtitle. All cultural practices and *tastes* in literature and art are closely connected with the educational level and social origin. Distinctions in goods, practices, and manners, associated with different social positions in every society, acts in the same way as differences that form symbolic systems, such as the set of phonetics of a language or the set of specific features and dissimilarities that constitute a mythical system, that is, as distinctive signs (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 8–9). This conception has affinities with Barthe's (1954) term *myth* to explain the culture in terms of signs ( see title *Semiotics Applied in Media*) in which he, too, critiques the French class system distinguishing *petite* or *little bourgeoisie*; the lower class; from the *big bourgeoisie*: the dominant social groups. The distinctions that denote classes are also arbitrary signs, that may render a different class association in a different society, and not because of any



fundamental qualities. The symbolic value vested in a particular language holds power only in that specific socio-cultural context, field, or linguistic market. Mandarin and English bilingualism, for instance, though holds the greatest capital in Singapore ( see Bokhorst-Heng and Silver, 2017), may not be that profitable and valued in some other speech community, France for instance (Helot & Young, 2002). The same applies to visual and material signs representing certain classes and differentiating them from other social groups implying that their signification is *arbitrary*, as explained above in the Signs and Semiotics section.

This discussion synthesizes the perspectives drawn from the critical theory of LPP, in general, and post-structuralist vein in particular Bourdieu's theory, through the vehicle of semiotic analysis of a short media episode. This study, therefore, recommends that there could be more than one approach and method incorporated to investigate an issue, thus widening the horizons of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary scholarships. The literature surfaced the English language as the most profitable language; yet accessible to those who have serviceable resources to procure it through EMI institutions. The semiotic analysis of the media text as a case instance has also endorsed similar class associations with English proficiency and fluency in Pakistan. The public reaction to this communicative act further reflects on the dichotomy in the society based on their language ideologies. The issues related to ethnolinguistic and ethnonational identity (Block & Corona, 2019) linked with the Urdu language are aggravated, protesting against the linguistic oppression perpetuated by the reproduction of the class system based on privileging one linguistic capital. Pakistan is a country of diverse cultures where language not only is a means of communication but also symbolizes different values, historically, socially, and culturally constructed. EMI has always been a hot-selling label in the Pakistani educational arena, particularly in the private sector in keeping with the value of the language at the global level. Its value may clash drastically with the status of Urdu and also of the regional languages at various sites. This paper thus concludes with the recommendations for the democratization of English and its fair distribution across all social classes. And, parallel upscaling of the *other* major language(s) in this multilingual community to counter the linguistic hegemony of *one* language.

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