**[Linguistic maze](https://www.dawn.com/news/1794419/linguistic-maze)**

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LANGUAGE is a cultural container, capturing a community’s ideas, behaviour, and philosophy. A disconnect with language is tantamount to detachment from one’s own culture, knowledge base, and intellectual advancement. Tragically, there are languages worldwide that are nearing extinction — leading to the imminent loss of cultural and intellectual heritage, as warned by Unesco.

Languages and their related cultures are either nurtured or eradicated by the educational system. An inclusive education system accommodates linguistic diversity. Prejudice and societal divides endure when linguistic hierarchies persist and are used as an instrument of subjugation.

There are three main components of language policy: language practices, language ideology or beliefs, and language management. The first includes the use of language in a variety of situations. The second refers to attitudes towards language in the pursuit of linguistic and non-linguistic objectives. The last entails making attempts to govern and promote certain languages via policies.

Education systems either nurture or eradicate languages.

In Pakistan, which is a society of diverse nations and languages, a linguistic hierarchy has evolved, with English as the dominant language and Urdu as an emblem of middle-class identity, often seen as marginalising regional languages.

The prevalence of English-medium education exacerbates inequality, and separates the wealthy from the marginalised elements of society. This enhances socioeconomic inequities and strengthens social binaries. Indigenous languages frequently take a back seat to English and Urdu in public school curricula and pedagogies, denying youngsters an education in their own language, damaging cognition and critical thinking, and depriving them of their broader cultural heritage.

We may call this the ‘language deprivation syndrome’, though it is a clinical term with reference to those with impaired hearing. Due to the strong link between cognition and language, children who are deprived of their first language throughout early education exhibit poorer cognitive and linguistic development. Executive functioning (broadly described as mental skills that allow learners to plan, organise and solve problems) and language are related. Executive functioning can be impaired in children facing language deprivation.

Presently, a body of evidence demonstrates that early education in the child’s native language is highly beneficial. The development of foundational ideas in children is enhanced when they communicate in their native tongue, as there are fewer obstacles to understanding. The likelihood of the successful acquisition of a second or foreign language (for example, Urdu and English) going forward, is greater when children attain literacy in their native tongue prior to the use of the second or foreign language as the instructional medium. For children, learning in their mother tongue improves their academic achievements, social growth, self-assurance, and capacity for critical analysis.

This is not to undermine English or Urdu as educational mediums. Everyone should have the right to choose. But these languages should not be presented as rivals to children’s native tongue or used to discriminate and socially polarise. Imposing Urdu as the medium of instruction on children who are more comfortable learning in their native language will create academic challenges and inequalities. In much the same manner, the use of English as the official lingua franca and elite language shows how language maintains authority and perpetuates societal divisions. The first address of the caretaker prime minister to his cabinet in English is an example of the supremacy given to the English language in Pakistan.

Again, this is not to diminish interactions and learning in English, which is the international lingua franca, as it opens doors to information that we may not be able to access in Urdu or indigenous languages. However, opening the information window to only the elite and using English for social status, to oppress others and to lessen the importance of other languages is the issue.

There is a need for equitable language policies and education systems, which are inclusive and respect all cultures in the best interest of society. Unsurprisingly, when a certain language is denied a role in the educational system, many parents respond by not encouraging its use at home, consequently losing the connection with cultural assets, knowledge and wisdom. Language is more than just a means of communication; it relates to a person’s sense of self, culture and daily life. Education itself is a way of living, and taking away language from one’s education is to deny them their right to live.

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