

Looking at the Punjabi Language through a Researcher's Lens

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It was a cold winter night and the sun had set hours ago, which triggered a desire to have a cup of tea at one of Islamabad's misty tea jungle points. It was the time when I was at the stage of selecting a topic for my doctoral research. Being in the middle of thinking about what could add value to the literature highlighting a key phenomenon which was taking place in society, I heard a conversation between the owner of the tea shop and his son. Their words grabbed my attention because there was not just one language at play. I tried to make sense as to whether it was code mixing/code switching between two languages, or perhaps the dialect of a local language or the words of a dying language. But soon the realization that a predominantly low-income, perhaps uneducated, Punjabi speaker was not having a conversation with his son in the Punjabi language made an imprint on my mind. It was at that moment that I remembered last year's birthday party for my best friend, Aleena.

It was the middle of September and I was anxiously waiting to celebrate the birthday of Aleena. I, along with my friends, made several plans to make it a memorable day for her. Finally, the day arrived when we all gathered in the front lawn of her house which was beautifully decorated for the party. After the arrival of the guests, Aleena cut the cake as all the guests sang the birthday song.

But, all of a sudden, a long, deep silence prevailed at the party when I saw Aleena being scolded by her mother. "What in the world are you doing? How can you speak that word? I just cannot believe that you are so ill-mannered. I always told you to be careful when you speak. You are allowed to communicate either in English or Urdu. Never, ever think about Punjabi language! Not even a single word! Don't you know that Punjabi is the language of uneducated people who live in villages? You have given me the greatest shock of my life by speaking a Punjabi word. I really wonder how and when will you understand!" I will never forget the birthday party of my best friend, Aleena.

Walking with the cup of tea in my hands, I thought about Pakistan, which is a land of linguistic diversity having more than sixty languages (Grimes, 2001). The Punjabi language, ranked in the top twenty of the world's most

spoken languages (Matthews, 2003), is the mother tongue of 54.6% of the population of Pakistan (Baart, 2001; Government of Pakistan, 2001). There are various dialects of the Punjabi language in Pakistan which include Shahpuri, Pothohari, Hindko, Malwi, Jangli and Majhi (Government of Pakistan, 2001; Masica, 1991). The Punjabi language is a rich and diverse language. It possesses a vast corpus of literature in terms of poetry and prose. The works of Waris Shah, Sultan Bahu and Bulle Shah are assets of the Punjabi language, for these great poets have conveyed messages of religious tolerance, mutual harmony, love, peace and dignity with the aim of enlightening the hearts and minds of the people. Apart from the works of famous poets and writers, the proverbs of the Punjabi language are an indication of its richness. The interesting and pithy maxims of the Punjabi language deal with almost every aspect of human life. But, despite its richness, beauty and charm, Punjabi is an unfortunate language in Pakistan (Mobbs, 1991) because it lacks the status and prestige which it deserves. The Punjabi language is the mother tongue of the majority of the population; Urdu is the national language of Pakistan although it is the mother tongue of only seven percent of the population (Government of Pakistan, 2001). English is the official language of the country, yet it is understood by just five percent or less of the population (Rahman, 2002). Because of the dominant place of English and Urdu in Pakistani society, it has been observed that native speakers of the Punjabi language, especially those living in urban areas, are consciously moving away from Punjabi, as it is not the language of communication, even among family members. People are learning and adopting English and Urdu which are considered to be the languages of educated and refined people. Instead of the Punjabi language, English and Urdu are the languages which are in the limelight as they are the languages of formal domains which include government, media and education because these two languages are supported by the government. Because of the state's overt and covert policies, English has become the symbol of the upper and upper-middle class; Urdu is the symbol of the middle and lower-middle class, whereas the Punjabi language has become the symbol of unskilled workers and the rustic, uneducated people who live in villages. Ideas of cultural shame and backwardness are associated with Punjabi (Rahman, 2002). Because of the low status of the Punjabi language in society, native speakers of Punjabi, especially those who are living in urban areas, are abandoning their native language.

For me, a language is a distinct attribute of human beings which differentiates us from the rest of the animal kingdom. The words of Aleena's mother haunted me like a nightmare when I finally decided to embark on an intellectual journey to explore the true status of the Punjabi language in our society in the light of the linguistic attitudes and linguistic practices of its native

speakers. It was at that time when I selected the Punjabi language as the topic of my doctoral research. I decided to conduct an ethnographic study of language desertion and language attitudes of native speakers towards the Punjabi language. During the course of this study, everyday linguistic practices of Punjabi native speakers were observed. The purpose of this study was to investigate whether Punjabi native speakers, living in the selected urban and rural areas, were deserting their native language. In the past, researchers have investigated the Punjabi language from historical, educational and political perspectives (Rahman, 1996; Mansoor, 1993). The uniqueness of this study was in the fact that the Punjabi language was explored from the perspective of language desertion by looking at its use in the informal domain of family conversations by its native speakers.

For my research, I selected Islamabad as representative of an urban area. Islamabad is the capital of Pakistan. It is situated in the Capital Territory on the Potwar Plateau. In 1959, the government decided to replace Karachi as the capital city and the site of Islamabad was selected for the development of the new capital. The construction began in 1961 and was completed in the middle of 1970. The task of building a new capital was given to Doxiadis, a Greek firm. Islamabad was officially declared the capital of Pakistan in 1967. Islamabad is spread over an area of 909 square kilometers. As it is a carefully planned and developed city, it is divided into eight basic zones: administrative, diplomatic enclave, residential areas, educational sectors, industrial sectors, commercial areas, and rural and green areas. Being the capital, it is the hub of government and bureaucracy. Famous buildings include The Presidency, the Prime Minister's House, the Diplomatic Enclave, the Supreme Court, the Shariat Court and many other important government buildings (Government of Pakistan, 2010). According to Gamma World City 2008, Islamabad has been ranked as a global city.

According to the 1998 census, the population of Islamabad is 901,137. It is a cosmopolitan city and people have settled here from different parts of Pakistan. Sixty-five percent of the population belongs to the Punjabi community, which is followed by the Urdu-speaking Muhajirs at around 14%, people belonging to Pashto speaking community account for 10.51%, and others (Sindhi, Balochi, Kashmiri) are 7%. Islamabad is surrounded by various cities, districts and towns from different directions. In the East, there are Kotli Sattian and Murree; in the northeast, there is Kahuta; to its northwest, there are Taxila, Wah Cantt and Attock District; to its southeast, there are Gujar Khan, Kallar Syedian, Rawat and Mandrah; to its southwest, is the city of Rawalpindi; and to its west is the North-West Frontier Province. Islamabad has a connection to the major cities of the world through its international airport. In addition, it has road and air links

to all the main cities and towns by means of the airport and motorways (Government of Pakistan, 2010).

Islamabad is known for its modern architecture, moderate climate, avenues, well- designed buildings, shopping malls, aesthetics and natural beauty. It has a lot to offer to its residents and tourists in the form of Faisal Mosque, Lake View Park, Shakar Parian, Pakistan National Monument, Daman-e-Koh, and Pir Sohawa. In addition to these beautiful sites, the majestic Margalla Hills give the city a fascinating look. It has a moderate climate with temperatures ranging from 45°C in the summer to -1°C in the winter. Islamabad has a high literacy rate of 72.38%. It is the center of a number of renowned and prestigious educational institutions. It was selected as the research site representing the urban side in this study because of its cosmopolitan nature. Five families residing in Islamabad were selected for the purposes of my research (Government of Pakistan, 2010).

The selected rural area includes a village near Gojra, a *tehsil* of Toba Tek Singh. This village was used as a research site to explore language usage among native speakers of Punjabi in rural areas. The name of the location, Toba Tek Singh, has its own historical background and significance. The Punjabi word “Toba” literally means pond and “Tek Singh” was the name of a kind-hearted and generous Sikh who used to provide water to poor people and travelers. Therefore, this place was named as Toba Tek Singh in order to acknowledge his social service and to pay tribute to the Sikh (Government of Punjab, 2010).

The district of Toba Tek Singh is situated in the center of the Punjab province. It is surrounded by Faisalabad, Jhang, Sahiwal and River Ravi. The district is spread over an area of 3,259 square kilometers. The major towns of the district include Pirmahal, Rajana and Sandhilianwali. According to the 2004 census, it is a densely populated district with a population of 17, 6257. According to the 1998 census, the literacy rate in the district is 50.5 percent. It has a higher proportion of males to females, 61.3 percent to 39.1 percent, respectively. It is further divided into three *tehsils*: Toba Tek Singh, Kamalia and Gojra including 539 villages and 82 union councils. Toba Tek Singh has road and rail links with Faisalabad, Jhang and Khanewal. Thirty-nine telephone exchanges operate in the district. As for power supply, there are twelve grid stations in the district. It is known for its fertile and productive land. The main crops grown in the district include sugar cane, wheat, cotton, maize, jawar, bajra, moong, mash, masoor, gram and oil seed. In addition to these crops, it has lush fruit gardens and is renowned for citrus fruits, guavas, mangoes and pomegranates. Vegetables grown in the district include potatoes, onions, cauliflowers, ladyfingers, turnips, carrots, peas, chillies, tomatoes and garlic. Besides an economy which is largely based on agriculture, the industrial sector makes a huge contribution to the local economy (Government of Punjab, 2010).

The village, which was selected for my research, is located in Tehsil Gojra in the district of Toba Tek Singh. The population of the village is approximately six thousand made up of 415 families. The residents of the village are provided with electricity, telephone, water, and roads. However, they are devoid of access to gas. In addition, there is no hospital in the village. Sources of income for the people are agriculture and other jobs. Famous crops of the village include wheat, cotton and sugarcane. The weather remains extremely warm from February to October, whereas the winter months and mornings are mostly foggy with low rainfall. In terms of local industry, there are many villagers who have involved themselves in the art of making carpets, which are sold in various cities throughout Pakistan.

The literacy rate of the village is 45%, including both males and females. There are four schools in the village: two government schools, Community Model Girls School and Government Boys Primary School, and two private schools, Paradise English Medium School and Faria Academy. Both government schools are Urdu medium schools, whereas the private schools are English medium. It was interesting to note the level of discrepancy in terms of school fees and uniforms between the government and private schools. In the government schools, the monthly fee of one student is one rupee, and the books are provided to the students by the government. On the other hand, the monthly fee of one student in both the private schools is one hundred and fifty rupees and the students have to buy their own books. The uniform code in both the schools is also different, as the students in the private schools are supposed to wear black trousers and a white shirt, while the students in the government schools are asked to wear *shalwar kameez* to school.

Before carrying out the main study, I conducted a pilot study. The purpose of the pilot study was to determine the accuracy, validity and reliability of data collection methods and review the process of data analysis, as the aim of a pilot study is not data collection, but to learn and experience the research process as a whole (Glesne, 1999). Three families participated in the pilot study. It was similar to the main study as I visited the people who took part in the pilot study and recorded their informal conversations and interviews.

During the course of the pilot study, I learned the art of interviewing research participants as part of real-life research studies (Roulston, deMarrais and Lewis, 2003) by carefully positioning myself as an explorer and not an imposer, and by providing them with the maximum time and freedom to express their own ideas and opinions (Wolfersberger, 2007). It gave me an opportunity to interview the participants in a natural setting and in a manner in which I made them the focus of the interview. It helped me to assess the accuracy of the interview guide

in terms of wording and content which enabled me to find out any possible loopholes in the wording, format and content of the interview guide, therefore increasing the reliability and validity of the various tools which were employed for data collection (Oppenheim, 1966; Glesne, 1999). The results of the pilot study gave me a better and more realistic understanding of the research process which included the time required for data collection and the techniques used in data collection and data analysis.

My research was an ethnographic study of the linguistic practices and preferences of Punjabi native speakers, living in both urban and rural settings, in their everyday lives. Lodica, Spaulding and Voegtle (2006: 267-268) define ethnography in the following way:

The word ethnography is derived from the Greek words *ethos* (“tribe”) and *graphos* (“something that is written”). Literally, then, ethnography is the science of writing about tribes or, to use more contemporary language, writing about cultural groups. Ethnographic researchers hope to provide rich narratives or descriptions of the communities or cultures under investigation ... It is a research method chosen when questions or topics are embedded in cultural complexities and the researcher wants to come to understand cultural reality from the perspectives of the participants.

Ethnography has emerged from a qualitative research paradigm as opposed to the quantitative research tradition. According to Miller and Brewer (2007: 99-100):

Ethnography can be defined as the study of people in naturally occurring settings or fields by means of methods which capture their social meaning and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting (if not always the activities) in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally... Several methods of data collection tend to be used in ethnography such as unstructured interviewing, participant observation, personal documents, vignettes and discourse analysis. In this way, ethnography tends routinely to involve triangulation of methods.

Fieldwork is at the heart of ethnography, as ethnographers are required to spend a considerable amount of time in the field in order to observe and describe the everyday lives of the participants in the midst of the research setting (Duranti, 1997). Ethnography is famous for its robustness as, “representing range of possible techniques, levels of analysis, and domains of inquiry; ethnography offers a holistic, grounded and participant-informed perspective ...” (Duff, 1995: 507).

On the whole, ten families, five from the urban area and five from the rural area, participated in the study. Ten participants, five representing the urban

and five representing the rural area, were interviewed. The participants were selected on the basis of their educational level, marital status, monthly income, occupation, family background and the amount of land owned. The age of the participants ranged from 33 to 45 years old. All of the participants were married and they all had similar educational backgrounds, as all of them were graduates holding a bachelor's degree.

Selection of participants is always a daunting task in any research project. At the outset, I thought of doing purposive sampling but, being aware of the risk of selecting a biased sample, I went in favour of snowball sampling which highlights the emerging nature of qualitative research design. I consciously tried to include participants who, I believed, would be able to offer diverse views in the light of their educational backgrounds and varied life experiences. Therefore, I contacted my friends and colleagues who identified suitable participants for the study who, in turn, identified other possible participants for my research. Later on, I contacted the identified participants and explained the nature and purpose of the study after which they expressed their willingness to take part in the study. The selection of participants through contacts helped me in recording their informal conversations and in conducting interviews with a certain level of trust and confidence was established between the researcher and the participants.

In accordance with the tradition of ethnographic research, I had to visit the families and spend considerable time with them. The nature of the research demanded that I observe and record the linguistic practices and language choices of my research participants in the domain of family conversations. Visiting the research sites personally allowed me to collect data which was firmly grounded in the participants' natural environments and contexts. It also familiarized me with the setting and background of the families. In addition, it also provided me with an opportunity to communicate and interact with the people of the community who were not a part of this research. At times, the families also invited me as a guest to their family functions and gatherings which gave me an opportunity to observe my participants in diverse natural settings of their everyday lives.

Before I left for the village, I had various preconceptions of it and its inhabitants. I was thinking about a very different lifestyle and, primarily, I was worried about dealing with the villagers. For me, just to think about traveling from the modern city of Islamabad to a village in the district of Punjab was an intimidating thought. When I entered the village, the sharp contrast between the people and lifestyle of Islamabad and that of the selected village was a mixed experience for me. However, the most amazing thing for me to experience was a sense of calmness, peace, serenity and slowness in the environment of the village. In the modern 21st century, technology-driven world, life is fast and many of us

cannot afford to be slow. It was, then, interesting for me to experience the slow lifestyle of the villagers, which was soothing in nature. I spent a lot of time sitting beside the canal listening to the musical sound of flowing water. I saw various of birds which I had never seen before.

The first visit to my participants' home was informal in nature as I introduced myself and I encouraged the family members to talk about themselves and their lives in general. Later on, I explained to them the topic and purpose of my study and their role in it. After discussing the research, I asked them whether they were willing to participate. After seeking their approval, I ensured them that they would be treated with respect and dignity. They would be allowed to express their ideas freely. The interviews would be conducted in a very friendly and cordial atmosphere. Pseudonyms would be used to protect their identities. I sought their permission to record the interviews and informal conversations for my research purposes and all of them willingly agreed. At the end of this initial meeting, I finalized the time to visit their house to observe their language practices and to conduct semi-structured interviews. I selected the venue for the interview after consulting my research participants, giving priority to their comfort and ease. All the participants agreed on giving interviews in their homes although the "informal ethnographic interview," as Agar (1980: 90) terms it, can be held anywhere, as there is no restriction on the setting. In the words of Agar (1980: 90):

You might ask informal questions while working with an informant on a harvest; you might ask during a group conversation over coffee; or you might ask while watching a ceremony. If used with tact, the strategies [...] can add to your ability to give accounts while doing minimal harm to the natural flow of events into which your questions intrude.

When I visited the homes of the research participants for the first time for collecting data, the parents introduced me as a close family friend to their children. They told their children that I would be a part of their family for some time. I noticed that in a couple of rural families, the children were apprehensive at the first. They consciously refrained from talking and playing in my presence which created problems for me, as I went there to see them talk! After a couple of visits, I started taking part in their everyday activities in order to gain their trust. Duranti says (1997: 89): "The observation of a particular community is not attained from a distant and safe point but by being in the middle of things, that is, by participating in as many social events as possible." So, I was a participant in the whole process as well, rather than just a formal, neutral and objective observer/researcher.

During the first phase of data collection, I decided to start with observing the participants in a natural setting because I wanted to look at their language

usage, choices and preferences before conducting the interviews. Observations are either structured according to a predetermined pattern or they are usually open and informal. In informal and open observation, the researcher, first of all, starts with a detailed and comprehensive discussion of the setting, people, events and incidents; thus, he/she paints a general picture of the research site. After painting a general picture, he/she moves on to particular events, actions and behaviors which are closely related with the phenomenon under investigation (Gillham, 2000). I started with informal and open observations in which I noted all the major and minor details about the people and their lifestyle. Later on, I observed the language which the family members used to communicate with one another. In particular, I observed the language which the parents used to talk to their children and the medium of communication among the siblings. I observed and audio recorded their language usage during the dinnertime and teatime settings.

The importance of accurately recording the verbal interactions of the participants in ethnographic research cannot be denied. Johnson (1992) highlighted three main methods: note taking, audio recording and video recording. In the course of my research, I relied on audio recording as a method of recording the utterances of my research participants. A tape recorder was used to record their conversations. I took my research diary with me as well in order to take notes on the details of their conversations and my personal feelings and reactions to various situations. The themes and insights, which emerged as a result of participant observation, helped me in an in-depth understanding of the language choices and preferences of my participants. Observations also proved helpful in verifying the data, which was generated as a result of the interviews, because it clearly revealed what people said and what people actually did. In short, observations helped in highlighting the discrepancy, if it existed, between the actions and thoughts of the research participants (Gillham, 2000).

After recording the informal conversation, I conducted interviews which lasted from one to one and a half hours. I made an interview guide which was in front of me while interviewing. Although the interviews were semi-structured, I still developed an interview guide which aimed at gathering answers to the major questions and concerns of this research. These questions helped me in gaining a better understanding of particular speech events. Furthermore, this approach enabled me to represent, "the world of [my] interviewees accurately, vividly and convincingly" (Rubin and Rubin, 1995: 261) and to collect the data from which I could, "select ... many quotes, examples and illustrations that make [my] case most convincing" (ibid: 261). These interviews allowed the, "respondent(s) to move back and forth in time – to reconstruct the past, interpret the present, and predict the future" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 273). However, I was flexible

enough to allow the participants, if required, to freely share their emotions and experiences. The interview guide served as a regular reminder during the interview so that I would not miss important points.

In each family, the parents were interviewed. The interview questions were open-ended so that the respondents had the freedom to express their ideas and feelings. The interviews focused on the everyday language practices of the research participants in different settings and contexts. Since the interviews were semi-structured, I gave them enough time to share their personal experiences with me. The participants were encouraged to respond in the language with which they were most comfortable. Almost all of them responded either in English or Urdu in the urban setting; conversely, all the participants, except one, from the rural area responded in Urdu. The language which I used during the interview was Urdu. I audio recorded the interviews. After each interview, I wrote notes with the aim of capturing the minutest details of the interview. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995: 40) highlighted the importance of writing notes immediately after each interview saying that doing so results in enriching data. In their words, "Over time, people forget and simplify experience; notes composed several days after observation tend to be summarized and stripped of rich, nuanced detail." I made an extra effort to include all the relevant details in my notes. Later on, I transcribed the interviews for the purpose of analysis.

Interviewing, particularly in the rural area, was challenging for me as a researcher as the people had conventional, traditional lifestyles due to a limited access to education and modern technology. The urban participants were eager to share their views at length, whereas the participants from the rural area were doubtful about the significance and relevance of their answers. They repeatedly asked whether their answers were correct. They were hesitant to open up during the interview as well. As a result, the number of meetings I had with the rural participants for interview was much higher than those which I arranged with the urban participants. But after my explanation of the purpose of the study, they willingly expressed their views. Recording the informal conversation of participants in the rural area was rather complicated due to privacy concerns of the participants. However, once I assured them that the recording would be used for research purposes only, they allowed me to make audio recordings.

During the course of the study, my aim was to find the truth behind the words of Aleena's mother and the conscious effort of the owner of that teashop to speak in a mixed language with his son. After conducting this research, I became aware of how different socio-political ideologies and factors work to change the perspective of people about a particular language---Punjabi in this case---in order to serve the interests of an already privileged group in society.

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