

**Media Anthropology Network**

**European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA)**

**E-seminar Series**

<http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>

**E-seminar 34**

**Mark Allen Peterson**

**Miami University**

*[Indexicality, iconicity and language ideology in the Urdu news revival](#)*

**Discussant: [Ursula Rao](#)**

**University of New South Wales**

**7 Dec – 22 December 2010**

**Postill, John [J.Postill at shu.ac.uk](mailto:J.Postill@shu.ac.uk)**

*Tue Dec 7 01:18:56 PST 2010*

Dear All

Welcome to the 34th EASA Media Anthropology Network e-seminar! The session will run on this list for a period of two weeks ending on Tuesday 21 December at 9 pm GMT.

On this occasion the seminar will revolve around a working paper by Mark Allen Peterson (Miami University, USA) entitled "Indexicality, iconicity and language ideology in the Urdu news revival" (abstract below).

A former political journalist in Washington, DC, Mark received his PhD from Brown University in 1996. He currently holds a joint position in Anthropology and International Studies at Miami University, in Ohio. Mark has conducted fieldwork in Egypt, India and the U.S. He is the author of the book *Anthropology and Mass Communication: Myth and Media in the New Millennium* (Berghahn 2003) and co-author of *International Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Global Issues* (Westview 2008). His new book *Connected in Cairo: Growing Up Cosmopolitan in the Modern Middle East* is scheduled to appear in 2011.

The discussant is Ursula Rao (University of New South Wales, Australia). Ursula is an urban anthropologist researching in India. The central focus of her work is changing power relations in rapidly globalising cities, with regards to three different topics: (1) The role of religious institutions and ritual performances for renegotiating social relations; (2) the changing role of news media for shaping urban politics; (3) the interaction between urban poor and state agencies in a landscape of shifting ideologies of urbanity and social security. She is the author of *News as Culture: Journalistic Practices and the Remaking of Indian Leadership Traditions*. (Berghahn 2010) and *Negotiating the Divine: Temple Religion and Temple Politics in Contemporary Urban India* (Manohar 2003).

A PDF of Mark's paper is now available on our site at <http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars> (with thanks once again to Philipp Budka)

If you're new to these e-seminars, this is how they work. First, our discussant posts his or her comments on the paper. Once the presenter has responded the floor is then open to the entire list for a period of two weeks. Please remember to keep your posts brief and on-topic, with cc: to me ([j.postill@shu.ac.uk](mailto:j.postill@shu.ac.uk)) so that I can be alerted to any problems with the listserv.

I'd now like to invite Ursula Rao to post her comments

John

ps If you haven't yet had a chance to read the paper, you can still do so now!:

<http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>

\*\*\*\*\*

### Abstract

In 1993, the prognosis for Urdu newspapers in India was dismal. The readership was aging and dwindling as the new generation learned Hindi in Devanagiri script. Urdu calligraphers (katibs) were not passing their skills on to a new generation, and writers skilled in Urdu were becoming increasingly hard to find. Fifteen years later, India is home to a prosperous and expanding Urdu press. Demographically, little had changed: the mean age of readers was 50 and the katibs had ceased to exist, yet the number of newspapers had tripled, circulations were often higher than they had been in the past, profits were up and the atmosphere at Delhi's major Urdu newspapers was upbeat. A large part of the explanation lies in the intersection of language ideologies and new writing technologies. On the one hand, new more flexible technologies allowed the retiring khatibs to be replaced by computer typesetting that strongly resembles north Indian calligraphic styles. On the other hand, Urdu indexes crucial politically urgent populations, leading to a renewed interest in it from many sectors. Increasingly classified as a "Muslim" language (even though the majority of Urdu readers in India have been Hindus), written Urdu is seen as a crucial medium for communicating with the Muslim minority in India as well as the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

---

**Ursula Rao** [u.rao@unsw.edu.au](mailto:u.rao@unsw.edu.au)

*Tue Dec 7 18:00:19 PST 2010*

Dear all,

thank you John for organizing this e-seminar. I read the paper with great pleasure. Here are my thoughts.

First let me thank Mark for a fascinating paper that examines the changing position of Urdu newspapers in the dynamic language environment of post-liberalization India. Urdu newspapers are booming at a time where Urdu as language has lost (or is losing) its role as medium for pan-Indian communication. Its survival or potential revival is linked to a language ideology that defines Urdu as the language of Indian Muslims. Mark importantly argues that the way this shift is brought about, performed and experienced is not only the result of the "noisy" political practices acted out in the public sphere (protest, riots, litigation). It is co-produced also through hidden and silent transformations in printing traditions, the way written Urdu is produced, distributed and consumed.

The paper has a historical and ethnographic part. Mark places current trends in Urdu news writing in the context of a complex history of language evolution. The ethnography of news making introduces Urdu newspapers as niche players in a booming print market. Urdu papers have been able to prosper due to technological innovation that allow companies to deliver cheap papers to a dispersed readership. The compromise of replacing hand written script with a computer font makes Urdu newspaper cheaper (read: more profitable) but destroys the art of Urdu writing. By ceasing to write Urdu art and calligraphy, newspapers no longer index high culture and thus indirectly place Urdu (the Urdu of newspapers) in its other context, signifying the language of the Muslim other.

The paper is in a draft form and there are a few loose ends that left me wondering about the significance of Urdu writing practices for emerging language ideologies.

Mark approaches the question of language ideology through script. This decision is prompted by the fact that script is a key indicator for language classifications. Consider for example the writing of fiction. South Asian literary studies have demonstrated that some so called “Hindi novels” (written in Devanagiri) contain more “Urdu” (Arabic or Persian) words than selected “Urdu novels”. The classification of these novels as belonging to one or the other language is based solely on the script (the religion of the author or his residence – in India or Pakistan). However, there are other significant dimensions of language differentiation, like lexicon, style and grammar (e.g. I often found that Hindus from Lucknow are described as speaking Urdu on account of their poetic speech style) . Mark states that editors largely reject literary Urdu and replace it with the language of the poor masses. One wonders about the connection between swapping hand writing for computer script and decisions about style and lexicon. How profound is the erasure of literary Urdu? What is the connection between readership (which classes do newspapers hope to attract, reach out to), shifting language styles and decision about script? Is the Urdu newspaper boom only an outcome of cheaper production and better distribution. Or are shifts in style and lexicon contributing to making the papers more readable and thus more attractive to the poor ‘masses’.

I did miss references to Urdu/Hindi literature studies. It seems that the academic literature on the political dimension on Urdu/Hindi literature classifications after partition is more relevant here than the narration of Urdu origin. The making of two nations has created a powerful pretext for communal classifications that are invigorated and nurtured by language divides (and the desire of India and Pakistan respectively to demarcate the border between Urdu and Hindi as well as contentious debate about which nation can claim which poets as its own).

I also have some questions about the connection between Urdu newspapers and language ideology. The demise of literary Urdu in itself is not a political statement. So how then exactly does the association between Urdu papers and the Muslim community emerge? Is it a perspective of outsiders or a self-classification of Muslims? The relation between Urdu and Indian Muslims is complicated by regionalisms, as Mark correctly shows. For which region does he speak. Would we find perception of Urdu in Delhi (where Urdu is the main language of Muslims) to be similar to those in Calcutta (where one would expect Bengali to be the first language of Muslims), or those in Mumbai (with an aggressive political culture that nurtures anti-Muslims sentiments). Mark might not have the data for a comparative article. However, I feel he could do more to specify the regional context of his own study and how region shapes his thesis (or does it?).

These questions result from an engagement with the text and the desire to know more. I reiterate that I found the text provocative and the main thesis that technology, production decisions and writing practices shape language ideology utterly convincing. Maybe my final question then is: Do Urdu newspaper writing practices underwrite a dominant trend visible also in other fields (e.g. politics, literature)? Or is there something specific about the way newspapers re-shape Urdu discourse? (I thought the class angle was very interesting and possibly warrants deeper exploration. While Urdu literature would appeal to an educated class Urdu newspapers seem to cater to the lows middle classes and barley literate).

Kind regards, Ursula

---

**Postill, John** [J.Postill at shu.ac.uk](mailto:J.Postill@shu.ac.uk)

*Wed Dec 8 00:35:10 PST 2010*

Many thanks to Ursula Rao for taking a break from her current fieldwork to contribute those comments and questions. It's over to Mark Peterson now for a response, after which the discussion will be open to all on this list

John

---

**Peterson, Mark Allen Dr.** [petersm2 at muohio.edu](mailto:petersm2@muohio.edu)

*Wed Dec 8 03:41:16 PST 2010*

I want to thank Ursula for her reading of my paper and her questions, which indeed go to the heart of uissues I've raised but not answered very effectively. I could not ask for a better interlocutor, and I want to here plug her book "News as Culture: Journalistic practices and the Remaking of Indian Leadership Traditions" (Berghahn 2010) as something no one engaged in the anthropology of news and newsmaking should miss.

Many of the questions she raises I cannot answer, but I can perhaps, better contextualize and articulate. The problem is that questions ask me to tease out and clarify things that exist as complex conundrums to the very journalists I interviewed.

First, the micropolitics of language differentiation between Urdu and Hindi are complex and always fascinating. Ursula's example of Lucknow speakers being viewed as speaking Urdu because their register is perceived as "poetic" is a case in point, as is the case of the film Jodhaa Akbar in which a scattering of lexical items and a performance style differentiate Emporer Akbar's Urdu from Princess Jodhaa's Hindi. Urdu editors are caught by the multiple contradictions here. They emphasize Urdu's history as a language of the masses (by which the Indian people spoke to their Persian conquerors), but also its more recent history as a formal legal and high cultural language, AND its current status as a language of the people, AND its place as a language of Indian Muslims. AND they speak of its importance as a tool for educating the Muslim masses. The language ideologies surrounding Urdu are complex and contradictory and when Urdu editors talk to me about what they do, their interviews are laden with these contradictions. The production of Urdu newspapers occurs entirely within the tensions between these multiple ways of conceptualizing the language and the challenge Im trying to undertake here is to describe this multilayered context without privileging any of it.

As for the growth of the newspapers, the growth in numbers of newspapers is usually ascribed to technoeconomic conditions but the growth in numbers of readers is often ascribed to an awakening of the Muslim masses to their collective identity, and the role of Urdu as "their" language. And yet, the numbers of readers of the two major Hindu newspapers in Urdu are also growing with the rise of new distribution technologies. Also, many of the new Muslim readers were educated at school in Hindi and have learned to read Urdu at Madrasas (religious schools) where it is seen as a "bridge language" between Indian mother tongues of whatever sort and the Arabic of the Qur'an (and, of course, this place as a bridge language is influenced by the fact that it is written in a Perso-Arabic script).

Ursula is also absolutely on the mark to raise the issue of regionalism in all of this. Most Muslims in India grow up speaking the same regional mother tongue as their Hindu (and Christian, etc) fellow citizens. They must learn Urdu as a second language. Obviously this is much easier for most speakers of Hindi dialects than for speakers of Bengali, Telugu, Tamil, etc. I am in this case dealing with the explosive growth of Urdu newspapers in New Delhi, and I will more clearly contextualize this in the next iteration of the paper. Indeed, this paper is an outgrowth, a tangent almost, from a wider study of changes in news culture since the beginnings of neoliberal globalization in India (around 1991)

I do know a little. In 1993 I did conduct interviews at Urdu newspapers in West Bengal, where most Muslims grow up speaking Bengali and in Maharashtra, where most Muslims grow up speaking Marathi, and found one or two thriving Urdu newspapers in each place, the readership consisting of older Urdu-literates who settled in West Bengal after partition and younger readers who learned Urdu in the Madrasa. The privatization of the Urdu newspaper industry—that is, the closure of state-funded Urdu newspapers, the establishment of the state-supported Urdu news service, and the availability of government advertising aimed at the Muslim masses—creates the same potential for growth as in new Delhi, but are there as many new Urdu readers or does learning Urdu as a Marathi or Bengali speaker produce smaller potential audiences? Alas, I have no data.

If I return to India to pursue a wider contextualization, it would be especially fascinating to explore conditions in Hyderabad, understood by Urdu journalists in Delhi as a place where Urdu is still a language of education and refinement, and where there are Urdu newspapers with circulations in the hundreds of thousands (and, I might add, the only remaining hand-scribed Urdu newspaper).

Ursula's final question is one I cannot answer. Nor can my informants: it is a question that puzzles and fascinates Urdu journalists. On the one hand, they want to emphasize their appeal to the Muslim masses (without which the ad revenues and Urdu news services they depend on would disappear), while on the other hand they insist on continuities between what they do and the writing of the great Urdu poets, literati and educators. In the process, they confront a great contradiction, for they want at once to emphasize Urdu as a language of South Asian literature (not of the Muslim community alone); yet they want to contribute to the project of creating and educating a national Muslim community defined in part by Urdu speech, bringing into existence the very thing that current language ideologies posit, that government agencies assume, but that national demographics show does not really exist—yet.

Ursula's remarks have taught me that I need to do a better job of figuring out how to discuss the forms of journalistic practice that exist within and because of these contradictions. I look forward to learning more from other members of the list.

Mark Allen Peterson

---

**Postill, John** [j.postill@shu.ac.uk](mailto:j.postill@shu.ac.uk)

*Wed Dec 8 06:53:35 PST 2010*

Many thanks to Mark for that swift response! The floor is now open for further questions and comments.

John

PS - Please remember to keep your posts brief and with cc: to me ([j.postill@shu.ac.uk](mailto:j.postill@shu.ac.uk)) so that I can be alerted to any delays with the listserv.

---

**Francisco Osorio** [fosoriog@msn.com](mailto:fosoriog@msn.com)

*Thu Dec 9 09:36:48 PST 2010*

December e-seminars are sometimes difficult for some of us, but I made myself time because Mark Peterson is a nice man and a great academic and I don't want this seminar to have less participation that it deserves.

Mark's reply to Ursula finishes with the sentence that he looks forward to learn from the list members. That comment almost put me off the discussion because I've got nothing to teach to Mark. Quite the opposite, reading Ursula's analysis and Mark's reply I have learnt a lot already. But the whole idea of our list is to support each other by reading and commenting in our papers, so here is my brief contribution to this conversation.

Based on Michael Silverstein's language ideology framework, Mark studies the "clusters of practices involved in writing, editing, distributing and consuming newspapers". As an example of writing and editing, Mark describes a highly specialised group of workers called katibs. They were vital to produce Urdu newspapers but today almost they are non-existent. The point I don't quite understand is Mark's sentence "we see in this relatively straightforward economic process of skilled workers replaced by technologies an expression and realization of a language ideology" (p. 9). My first question is about the sense of the concept "replaced" because katibs seemed to reduce their numbers 'before' computer typesetting. My second question is about being this process of replacement an example of language ideology. According to the definition on the paper, language ideology is a "sets of belief about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language use" (p. 2). I see the connection, but I don't quite fully understand how ones translate into the other, so I would like to ask for some help here.

---

**Elisenda Ardevol** [eardevol@gmail.com](mailto:eardevol@gmail.com)

*Thu Dec 9 16:31:22 PST 2010*

Dear list,

I think the paper we discuss this e-seminar appeals to many important issues of the contemporary "symbolic struggles", that is how subtle language games entails not so subtle ideological discourses and political agendas.

Bridging the gap, I think Mark's article touches a very sensitive part of the relationship between language, politics and cultural identity.

*>From a linguistic anthropology perspective, I understand he examines the growth of newspapers in Urdu related to a "new" connection between language and identity, i.e. the use of Urdu as a 'diacritic' to identify and deepen a dispute within the society in India, not only as an index to point to a type of readers (Muslims) and a particular political ideology. Subtle language differences are used to perform national and/or religious identities and political ideologies in new ways.*

If so, we may find many other examples in other parts of the world. In Spain, take the differentiation between Catalan and Valencian as separate languages, as the similarities and differences in dialect between the two is recognized by most of the people themselves, Valencian and Catalan, as a common language. However, some politicians have used the language "Valencian" not only as an index to point to a national identity but as a diacritic to distinguish the Valencia country from the Catalan, and therefore to wrest away from any possible cultural and political influence of Catalonia. This was made possible in part thanks to new technologies, automated translation services, etc. In this case, 'Valencian' is institutionalized in the Valencian media while 'Catalan' is banned as a foreign language (despite Valencia and Catalonia share a common linguistic, cultural and political heritage). The expected result: to break the linguistic unit and thus undermine the cultural unity of both peoples..... Any case, my point is to add the diacritic function to the indexicality, if it is possible, and wonder if this valencià/català example is useful to understand and extrapolate Mark's analysis.

Thanks,  
Elisenda

---

**Mark Pedelty** [pedeltnh at umn.edu](mailto:pedeltnh@umn.edu)

*Fri Dec 10 14:00:42 PST 2010*

Thanks, Mark, for the fascinating paper. Not only does it provide a useful orientation to those of us who are unfamiliar with your field site, it is an excellent case for understanding comparative developments throughout the world in "new" communication technologies, press organs, and language ideologies.

I might argue for finding something more nuanced than "determinism" when discussing various arguments that incorporate technology as a factor. It can become a straw man for making idealist arguments seem more nuanced. The incredible prevalence of similar stories worldwide indicates that tech and macro-ideo/market shifts are important to consider as well if we are to develop more holistic and systemic understandings. Hyper-local and "ethnic press" organs are prospering right now for multiple reasons, and the technological piece simply can't be ignored (or, on the other hand, overemphasized, I agree). It is particularly interesting when our informants make a tech claim and we decide on a fairly ad-hoc basis that their analysis is incorrect (wouldn't they be the primary experts?). Perhaps because it seems

too conventional and conflicts with preferred theoretical frames such as language ideology? Your analysis is very cogent, and I buy it, but it is important not to be equally deterministic in combating what seems to be an overly simplistic claim about technology facilitating more integrated social communication at a lower cost than prior forms. Each of these explanations is, no doubt, extremely partial, in every sense of the term.

I agree with the earlier comment. I learned a lot from the paper and have little to contribute in return. However, I do have one question. Much of my teaching is with future journalists, many of whom go out to study, intern, and then work at a growing number of surprisingly profitable (and thus viable) hyper-local press institutions or those that transcend geography yet still have a tightly defined niche audience. I think that your work has incredible relevance to such students and others. If you don't mind this pedestrian and functionalist question: When writing this, what audiences do you have in mind and how do you imagine your insights concerning language ideologies might be "used" by them?

Thanks, Mark. Great stuff.

---

**Daniel Taghioff** [danieltaghioff at yahoo.com](mailto:danieltaghioff@yahoo.com)

*Sun Dec 12 09:16:21 PST 2010*

Dear Mark, Ursula and list

The aims of this paper are very well crafted in that it raises crucial issues about attempting to connect 'base-super-structure' arguments, to put this in its crudest historical form. Both 'dialectical' and 'articulation' arose from such debates.

Two current markers of these zones are "technology" and "ideology". However there is a problem in the approach to language here that plays out a lot of concerns in "ideology" debates. Because people's thinking cannot be unitary and consistent, nor static, the idea of hegemony was furthered to cope with the shifting contested and fractured status of any "ideology".

I think this raises potential shortcomings in the objects of study, in that one cannot examine very fully the linkages between language ideology and technology from a production site. Having said that, the case for the linkage between shifting production technologies being implicated with shifts in language ideologies is made, but in a way that suggests a lot of additional avenues of inquiry.

If language ideology is understood as language hegemony, it raises the issue of their being far more sites of articulation to look at in order to really get the scope of such changes. Maybe this is not Mark's project, but reception of these Urdu publications seems significant, as does their implication in political events. Presumably politicians and activists and television journalists read these publications? Where are the imminent earthly articulators of this language hegemony, and how is this related to twists and turns in politics and the economy? The mention of the rise of Hindutva in the paper is very interesting, to what extent are Hindutva-esque discourses of the Muslim internalised by both producers and receivers? I did not see any lengthy discussion of how editors imagine their audiences, and how they gauge response to what they publish, this seems crucial given the "ideological" questions raised.

Similarly, technological change is also dynamic and de-centered to an extent, and located in a series of material relays, and can be seen as a shift in work-nets. But this is part of wider changes in publishing and distribution and the workings of the economy. How are these technological changes implicated with the wider shifts in the economy and shifts in reading as well as production habits?

I think raising questions like this would do more justice to the dynamism and ecological character of both technology and ideology debates. Having said that the paper certainly does throw a new take on these debates by looking closely at how editors understand such changes. I wonder how much they see themselves as part of a wider landscape of shifting relationships? That more personified aspect of these changes would be interesting to bring out, it might give clues as to how the new political economies and new language hegemonies of publishing are emerging together.

Daniel

---

**Peterson, Mark Allen Dr.** [petersm2 at muohio.edu](mailto:petersm2@muohio.edu)

*Mon Dec 13 04:34:25 PST 2010*

Francesco is just being silly in suggesting I can't learn from him. Both his questions are crucially important to my purpose in the paper, which is to flesh out economic explanations with some cultural context.

Many of my informants described the changes in Indian news culture (of which this study is a part) in deterministic ways, as if a shift from "socialist" to "liberal market" economic regulations automatically produces particular kinds of results. My argument is (the not very profound observation) that the economic mechanisms like supply and demand operate within shifting cultural contexts and are hence contingent even though after the fact they appear (especially to many of the people in the press business who were explaining to me what happened between 1991 and 2008) inevitable.

In the case Francesco brings up, the katibs were engaged in a series of legal battles with some Urdu newspapers, on the one hand, and journalists' unions on the other, over whether they should be considered the equivalent of typesetting machines or whether they should be considered text editors (and hence subject to the minimum wages set by the Press Board).

Even as these battles raged, other venues for katibs had all but disappeared with the decline of Urdu writing as a prominent north Indian prestige form (being able to read and enjoy Urdu poetry is still a status marker in many literary Hindi circles). Unable to attain union membership, katibs began to stop grooming their sons for a field in which there was no future. All other things being equal, Urdu newspapers would have soon had to start paying higher wages because of supply and demand—fewer calligraphers means higher demand. Computer typesetting was not an option for most Urdu newspapers as they did not have the capital to invest in the technology. The PC revolution, with its powerful, inexpensive typesetting, arrived just in time to finally render the katib obsolete.

The point is, shift some variables and we get very different outcomes. If Urdu were perceived differently, the calligraphers and linotype press systems would have already disappeared, as

they had in Hindi and English newspapers, as an effect of economic efficiency. Had Urdu stayed the same kind of prestige language, instead of undergoing the complex transitions I describe, the katibs might have stayed on as necessary, and even status-producing, parts of the news process. Had PC technologies with Perso-Arabic scripts arrived even five years later, katibs might have been unionized and a katib/subeditor position might have been created, much the way PCs led to subeditors taking on some pagesetting responsibilities in Hindi and English newspapers.

Thus new technologies, liberalizing economic policies (which have completely broken the power of the unions), and cultural factors (changing language ideologies in this case) coalesce to produce particular results.

---

**Postill, John** [J.Postill at shu.ac.uk](mailto:J.Postill@shu.ac.uk)

*Mon Dec 13 15:52:27 PST 2010*

Many thanks to Mark, Ursula and all other participants for that first round of contributions to the e-seminar on the Urdu press. We've still got ample time till Tuesday 21 Dec to raise further issues and post follow-up questions and comments, so please keep them coming!

Meanwhile I'd like to follow up with Mark - and others on this list - the question of (news) media and socio-cultural change. Mark says that this case study is part of a larger project addressing this question. I'd be interested to know how this case study relates to work by Mark and others who seek to theorise change within the anthropology of news media and adjacent fields (on the anthropology of news media see Bird 2010).

My impression is that media anthropology in general has so far undertheorised change - two recent exceptions being Kjaerulff (2010) and Tenhunen (2008).

John

#### References

Bird, S. Elizabeth (ed), 2010 *The Anthropology of News & Journalism: global perspectives*. Indiana.

Kjaerulff, J. 2010 *Internet and Change: An Anthropology of Knowledge and Flexible Work* (Hojbjerg, Intervention Press, 2010)

Tenhunen, S. 2008 'Mobile technology in the village: ICTs, culture, and social logistics in India', *JRAI* (N.S.) 14, 515-534

---

**Philipp Budka** [ph.budka at philbu.net](mailto:ph.budka@philbu.net)

*Fri Dec 17 02:15:12 PST 2010*

Dear List,

Just a brief reminder that the e-seminar on Mark A. Peterson's working paper "Indexicality, iconicity and language ideology in the Urdu news revival" is still running till next Tuesday. So there is ample time to read the working paper, the current contributions via the mailing list, pose questions and comments and thus get into discussion with the author and this e-seminar's discussant Ursula Rao!

You can download the paper at:

<http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>

All the best from snowy Vienna,

Philipp

**Peterson, Mark Allen Dr.** [petersm2 at muohio.edu](mailto:petersm2@muohio.edu)

*Sat Dec 18 04:27:34 PST 2010*

Reply to Mark Pedelty's comments

First, I accept Mark's rebuke. Coming on top of Francesco's it makes it clear I have not effectively framed my argument. I am by no means trying to present longstanding historical shifts in language ideology as an alternative causal explanation for the revitalization of the Urdu press, nor am I dismissing the causal roles of economic liberalization and adaptation of new technology. On the contrary, I think these are irrefutable.

They are often presented, however, in deterministic ways by my informants, and by outside "experts". My project—both this one and the grander project of which it is part—involves reminding myself and them and my readers that economic shifts occur within cultural milieu that shape how people view, frame and interpret such basic economic concepts as market, value, efficiency, risk and so forth.

In spite of new availability of investment capital, for example, many newspapers continue to see loans as morally suspect. While the biggest Hindi newspapers became the biggest in part through regular pursuit of bank investment, others prided themselves on their austerity, expanding much more slowly by investing in themselves, taking smaller profits for their shareholders. Before the recession, they were practically mocked for failing to keep up with the times, being hidebound by older thinking (when loans were what failing businesses took out to keep themselves going). After the global recession hit, the moral underpinnings of their austerity went unremarked, and they were praised for "finding efficiencies."

As for the practical, I actually think about this a lot. The digital technology revolution changed everything in India in three ways:

First, it allowed people to do everything cheaper:

- In India in 2008, someone with just USD \$50,000 to invest could find a small language community and start offering television in the local language, meet expenses, and make their investment back in two years.

- Four college buddies started an Urdu news service. Many editors pooh-pooh it as too small to count, yet they meet expenses and make middle class salaries for the four of them.
- An entire Urdu daily newspaper of 12 pages with 25,000 subscribers can run off a single Mac laptop (they use two, just in case...)

Second, it creates ever expanding opportunities. I gave a "how-to" workshop on freelance journalism at the Times of India Media School and it became clear that this is a rapidly expanding area. One can imagine any number of services and provide them. In 1992, Sunil Sethi was, I believe, the only full-time freelance journalist in the country. Now there are hundreds, perhaps thousands of them, providing everything from translation services to reporting on demand to feature stories to specialized news and commentary, and everything can be tailored.

Third, it is a system of extreme economic uncertainty ("risk" and "opportunity" in econ parlance). It selects for younger journalists without the responsibilities of family, and for those with a parachute of some sort—a gainfully employed spouse, a joint family living situation. I hired my own transcriptionists through a web site where college-educated Indian housewives market their skills for part-time work. The best of these—fast, thorough and able to work in English, Hindi and Urdu--continued to work for me by e-mail even after I left India. I got her a vendor number with my university and continued to send her work and pay her via the Internet until my grant ran out.

My advice:

Way back in the dark ages, when I was a reporter, I attended two speeches in the same week. One was by President Bill Clinton, the other by House Speaker Newt Gingrich. Both predicted a future in which the key player was "the flexible worker" who moved from job to job dozens of times in his lifetime, pausing only to retrain and retool between work assignments. That two such different people could agree on what was coming (they differed on what kinds of safety nets society should offer these workers) impressed me. In the media today, the era of the flexible worker is truly upon us.

The three rules of thumb that derive from this are:

First, you cannot learn too many skills. Print journalism, editing, digital media editing, scripting, web writing and editing, graphic design, writing ad copy, the list is endless.

Second, you have never had so many effective ways to market yourself. Learn about social media as a marketing and professional networking tool, the use of blogs, on-line cooperatives, the list goes on and on, and new ones are being invented as I write this. Learn as many as you can, recognize what each different type of site can and can't do for you and invest your time in each accordingly.

Third: practice zen economics (ala Sahlins classic paper in Stone Age Economics). Enjoy what you do as you do it, ignore the endless cycle of desires promoted by advertising and live below your means.

---

**Peterson, Mark Allen Dr.** [petersm2 at muohio.edu](mailto:petersm2@muohio.edu)

*Sat Dec 18 05:06:18 PST 2010*

Ah yes, the question of audience.

How does one address such a question when dealing with a city of tens of millions of residents many of whom receive multiple newspapers even in multiple languages?

With four research assistants we interviewed several hundred newspaper readers, and I conducted several ethnographic studies of sites of reception, but Urdu, being so tiny, evaded us. Indeed, one of the few interviews with Urdu readers was a Hindu who read Pratap--an Urdu Hindutva paper, one of the oldest Urdu newspaper coming to Delhi during partition--to find out what the Muslims are up to! For him, Urdu signified an authenticity about Muslims that he couldn't get from his Hindi Hindu nationalist newspaper.

I'm afraid the actual audiences of these newspapers are as much a mysery to me as they are to their editors. And yet, given that they have many newspapers to choose from, and that all run most of their news from the same source (UPI Urdu service), we should be able to make some reasonable guesses about how they see themselves based on the things that do differ, such as editorial pages. But as I've written elsewhere, these newspapers construct particular kinds of identities which they invite their readers to imagine themselves part of; we cannot know to what extent the identities actually "fit" in any empirical sense.

Mark Allen Peterson

---

**Postill, John J.** [J.Postill at shu.ac.uk](mailto:J.Postill@shu.ac.uk)

*Mon Dec 20 01:42:11 PST 2010*

Many thanks Mark for that latest round of replies to comments from the floor.

We've still got till tomorrow evening (Tuesday) 9 pm GMT for final comments and follow-ups on Mark Peterson's working paper, so please let's have those final posts before the festive season gets underway!

John

---

**Sahana U.** [sahana\\_udupa1 at yahoo.co.in](mailto:sahana_udupa1@yahoo.co.in)

*Mon Dec 20 07:31:05 PST 2010*

Dear all

Firstly, I thank Dr Peterson for a fascinating paper on Urdu newspapers and his brilliant analysis of a complex intersection of technological changes and language ideologies. The responses from Prof Rao (who has produced equally brilliant work on the news media in post-liberalization India), Dr Ardvoll and others are insightful and extremely helpful. By focusing on the everyday business and institutional practices of the news media, Peterson adds a crucial

dimension to the discussions on language ideologies and how the shifts in the indexicality of Urdu language are imbricated in these quotidian, and also intentional practices of news professionals.

My dissertation work on the bilingual news media in the southern state of Karnataka in India, and more particularly the capital city of Bangalore (also known as the ‘high tech capital’ of India and outsourcing hub for the global outsourcing industry) directly engages questions of language ideologies, identities and the unstable constellation of meanings and communities indexed by Kannada, the local language. However, I situate these emergent meanings around Kannada firmly within the growing hegemony of neoliberal capital, the official language of which in India is indisputably English. I also trace the history of Kannada language briefly (also in Udupa 2010), to wonder why and how the multiple histories of the language are increasingly rendered in a particular sense of its “potential to confront” English hegemony and the global modernity signalled by English in the years following economic liberalization. I have two questions to the author. In his analysis, has he found the conception of “vernacular”, widely used to understand the dynamics of regional languages in India, useful? Since I find no mention of the theories of vernacular in the paper, I suspect he did not find much merit in the arguments on the notion of the vernacular. However, if vernacularity is to be understood as “not pure, systematic, temporally primordial, or territorially bounded; it speaks to the heterogeneity of postcolonial idioms and forms of experience while addressing their contemporaneity and currency, and their implicitly subordinate relation to hegemonic forms of discourse and practice” (Jain 2007: ), should we understand Urdu news as performing a certain function of the subaltern or would Peterson think of this association as over-stretched, if not completely dubious? In my dissertation, I replace “vernacular” with “bhasha” media, which is simply “regional language media” in some sense, but it also indexes claims to cultural richness and distinctness, often with popular imaginations of “geocultural spaces of political expression” (Pollock 1998: ) and particular sets of sedimented meanings conveyed through their position as vehicles of nearness, intimacy and familiarity. After reading Peterson’s brilliant article, I am convinced that there exist many more dimensions to these dynamics. Second, how does he trace the markings of neoliberal modernity within the Urdu press, and the semi-permeable boundaries of the press in multiple languages in contemporary India? A resident editor of the largest circulated English daily in India once told me that there are footprints of “aspiration even within the (conservative) Muslim community”, when he narrated how he sees veiled Muslim girls having romantic conversations with young men on motorbikes at the street corners. Stereotypical images of the Muslim community are of course evident in such descriptions, but the point on some kind of democratization of aspiration – to be a modern-consuming subject and its transcendence across language barriers seem to be vetted by a lot of newspaper editors. Did Peterson encounter such narratives during his ethnographic work?

Dr Ardvoll brings a very useful comparative perspective on Catalan and the diacritic function of Urdu. For my work on the bilingual news media in Karnataka, I find the twin aspects of indexical and diacritic functions extremely useful. Indeed, at a recent conference in Delhi, a scholar from Catalonia mentioned state regulations around compulsory Catalan music in the radio. It is interesting to see how local languages seem to be taking similar functions across the world, although they are shaped by specific histories and trajectories of growth. These are quick responses, and I very much hope that there will be a chance to have a detailed discussion with Dr Peterson soon.

Best

Sahana Udupa  
 Doctoral Candidate, National Institute of Advanced Studies  
 Indian Institute of Science Campus, Bangalore, INDIA

#### References

- Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art* (Duke University Press, 2007)
- Pollock, Sheldon (1998) "The Cosmopolitan Vernacular" *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 57 (1): 6-37
- Udupa, Sahana (2010) "Print Communalism: the Press and the non-Brahmin movement in princely Mysore 1900-1930." *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (forthcoming)

**Tom Van Hout** [tom.vanhout@gmail.com](mailto:tom.vanhout@gmail.com)

*Tue Dec 21 10:18:26 PST 2010*

Dear all,

I'd like to thank Mark for his paper on Urdu news writing practices -- a lovely case-in-point of how social life is indexed through language use. I'd also like to thank Mark for his help, encouragement and advice on numerous occasions throughout the years. "Teaching is a collaborative effort" he wrote to me a few months ago. And since research is too, I'd like to contribute the following (last-minute) comment:

Silverstein's work on indexicality has sparked a wave of interest in the linguistic anthropology of social relations. But as an analytical concept, I've always struggled with indexicality because it is so all-inclusive (all meaning-making is indexical) and because I find Silverstein's writing notoriously complex. Silverstein (2003: 193) argues that indexicality presupposes "a schematization of some particular sort" through which first-, second-, and n-th order meanings are dialectically constituted.

Since Mark's paper deals with the indexicality of Urdu orthography, I wonder if the revitalization of the Urdu press has enregistered a first-order indexicality of Muslim identity vis-à-vis a second-order indexicality of pan-Indianness perhaps?

Kind regards,

Tom

Silverstein, Michael. (2003). Indexical order and the dialectics of sociolinguistic life. *Language & Communication*, 23/(3-4), 193-229.

**Kathryn Graber** [kegraber@umich.edu](mailto:kegraber@umich.edu)

*Tue Dec 21 13:35:02 PST 2010*

Dear list members,

Apologies for the last-minuteness of these comments, but I have just finally been able to give Mark Allen Peterson's very interesting paper and recent responses the time and attention they deserve.

This is fascinating material, and I thoroughly enjoyed the paper, as both a media anthropologist and a linguistic anthropologist (which speaks, I hope, to its broad appeal within anthropology). I particularly appreciated the description of kitabs' now-obsolete work in Urdu-medium newspapers. This strikes me as an unusually clear example of a language ideology motivating the adoption of one media technology (lithography) over another (movable type). This clarity, I will admit, I found somewhat lacking in the larger argument regarding the relationship between language ideologies that are 'out there' in the cultural ether and the technological changes that are determined by them (?) or that determine them (?). Of course, I understand that this is an early draft, and I offer these comments with great anticipation and excitement for what the final product will be!

(1) My first comment concerns the directionality of the language ideology <--> material practices relationship at the center of this paper. I don't want to venture far down the determinism road here, as I think Dr. Peterson has already effectively addressed this in some of his responses, especially that to Mark Pedelty. However, clarity on these issues is important if the paper and larger project are to complicate existing techno-economic explanations of the revitalization of Urdu-language newspapers.

Dr. Peterson repeated in one of his responses (Dec 14) that language ideologies have consequences for media technologies. The examples at hand were various kinds of purist language ideologies, according to which media demand certain "clean," "correct," "real," or otherwise hyper-"proper" linguistic forms that journalists and other media personnel were anxious about producing. I'm sure many of us can fill in our own examples from fieldwork. I found similar purist language ideologies in my recent dissertation work with minority-language journalists in Buryatia, an ethnic republic of Siberia, where similar anxieties over language shift and correctness adhere. Crucially, however, I found that journalists working in different media platforms - print, radio, television, internet - had different stances on language purism, with (for example) television workers admitting far more Russian influence than (for example) newspaper editors. In fact, journalists working in different platforms evinced and enacted radically different language ideologies, which I can show proceed from the material specificities of different media (rather than from, say, the topical content of different platforms, or the personal proclivities of individual journalists). While I agree with Dr. Peterson wholeheartedly that language ideologies \*can\* direct technological decisions, I saw this in the draft only in the (again, very interesting) example of the kitabs. Elsewhere, I was really left wondering about the direction of influence between the language ideologies that Dr. Peterson outlines for us and what we might call media ideologies. To what extent are the language ideologies described co-produced by the technologies they would seem to rule? (On "media ideologies," see Ilana Gershon's introduction in the September 2010 issue of the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*.)

(2) One way of approaching this might be to clarify where language ideologies are 'located.' Who exactly thinks of Urdu as a delocalized Muslim language (p.5) - regionally, in government bodies, in newspaper staff rooms? If a language ideology is diffused throughout media structures, or throughout society at large, are there points of hyper-salience? I found Daniel Tagihoff's suggestion about "language hegemony" especially provocative along these lines. By not locating ideologies in specific persons, sites, or ethnographic interactions,

this paper does imply a sort of hegemony of dominant language ideologies. Was this intentional? I can imagine an interesting argument here, though I think we'd need some additional ethnographic information about how ideologies regarding Urdu are 'traveling' and becoming dominant/hegemonic (through media production, for example?). I wonder if it would be useful to extend the historical background sections of the paper (which I thought were great) to speak explicitly to the development of such a hegemony in contemporary India.

(3) Finally, a couple of questions on categories from linguistic anthropology. I am, possibly, the last person to shout down a ling anth approach to news media, particularly an analysis based on language ideologies. But there were a couple of points at which I found myself confused and thought the ling anth lingo unnecessary. I didn't understand the use of "metadictic" (p. 2) or the application of Irvine & Gal's conception of fractal recursivity on p. 7. More importantly, since it's in the title, I didn't see what the category of iconicity was doing for the analysis. Following Silverstein, was this a Peircean use of iconicity? The more general use of indexicality is great, however, and it might be interesting to go farther with this, analyzing the historically shifting indexical position of Urdu in terms of 'orders of indexicality,' like what Miyako Inoue did in her analysis of Japanese women's language. (Apologies for the lack of citations here and above - I'm on the road - I can send a follow-up if anyone asks.)

Thanks for some provocative reading and a wonderful intro to language issues in Urdu newsmaking. This is a great project!

Happy holidays & end-of-term,  
Kate

**Postill, John** [J.Postill at shu.ac.uk](mailto:J.Postill@shu.ac.uk)

*Wed Dec 22 02:32:08 PST 2010*

Dear All

As we've had a number of last-minute questions, Mark has kindly agreed to respond to them by 11 pm tonight (Wed) GMT, after which we'll close the session. Thanks Mark!

John

**Peterson, Mark Allen Dr.** [petersm2 at muohio.edu](mailto:petersm2@muohio.edu)

*Wed Dec 22 04:56:00 PST 2010*

First, I'd like to thank John for extending the seminar, and to thank my colleagues whose thoughtful contributions served as a justification for the extension. As I said before, this is a difficult time for me to participate—end of the semester madness followed by increased (and appropriate) family demands of the season—but I will try to conclude with two last posts.

In this one I want to take up Sahana Udupa's questions on vernacular, and then to take up Tom's and Kathryn Graber's questions, which I think are related.

Sahana Udapa brings up the central Indian notion of conceiving of the media, and especially the press, in terms of a dichotomy between the Vernacular Press (all media in Indian languages) and the National Press (English)—and notice the slippage between a language distinction of the one hand and a political one on the other.

The concept of the vernacular press is deeply rooted in Indian language ideologies, especially as they relate to the media. But I never think of it as an isolated category. It is part of a semiotic distinction: vernacular/national. In my work on Indian press culture in New Delhi the early 1990s, the distinction was central to everything I learned about language ideology.

What's more, it affected practices. One upper class college educated woman told me in 1992 that if she was on a train and bored and really desperate for something to read, and there was an abandoned Hindi newspaper sitting on the seat beside her, it would never even occur to her to pick it up and read it. There were things one reads in English and things one reads in Hindi (or other "vernaculars") and one's literary practices could be described using the distinction, within relevant social fields.

While I think the concept of vernacular/national has changed both in public discourse and practice—certainly far more people consume news in multiple languages and registers—I think it remains a centrally important concept. I didn't bring it up in this paper because it is not specifically relevant to my argument as it stands. But the V/N distinction continues to have important social (read class), political and economic meanings and consequences.

But I think Sahana's comments further involve a confusion between "vernacular/national" as a culture concept that needs to be unpacked and explained as part of an understanding of language ideologies, and the use of vernacular as an explanatory concept. The term "Vernacularity" to describe actual language practice makes me cringe.

I understand Sahana's confusion here. Several otherwise exemplary works on the Indian press—those she mentions, but also Robin Jeffries comes to mind—take the dichotomy as a real world distinction and use it unproblematically in organizing their causal explanations of aspects of the Indian press. This is unfortunate and at the risk of being contentious, I would argue this is not a good model to follow and Sahana's discomfort suggests (to me) that she is thinking in the right direction.

Maybe this example will help. As I think about National/Vernacular I'm reminded of the debates in anthropology about the distinction between savagery/civilization. In grad school I was told of a (possibly apocryphal) incident surrounding an address by then AAA president Sol Tax. Tax undermined the basis of that distinction as a useful explanatory or organizing principle in anthropology. Afterwards, during Q&A, someone asked "But if we don't use 'savage' what term should we use?" And the exasperated Tax replied, "There is no scientific utility in having one word to describe 'oak trees' and another term to describe 'all the other trees in the forest.'"

"Vernacular" of course describes all the other trees in the forest and I have therefore found it to have little or no explanatory value in my work (except if I want to say to an Indian "I'm studying the vernacular press in Karnataka" in which case they have an immediate partial understanding of what I'm up to). Replacing "vernacular" with "bhasha" has interesting political implications for Sahana's authorial roles, but does not resolve what I think is the key issue here.

But the "vernacular" remains very important in understanding Indian language ideologies as they relate to media because it raises the question, "why do Indians make a distinction between English and 'all the other languages'?" And as you answer this question, rich complex intertwined political, social, cultural and economic issues are revealed. There are important historical issues here, and institutions that have stakes in maintaining the distinction, and others that have interests in downplaying it.

I hope this helps. I'll be happy to continue this discussion with you, Sahana, either on the list or privately.

As for Shana's second question, absolutely the resurgence of the Urdu press represents such aspirations. And, as Ursula indicated, it has regional implications. For Hindi literates, it takes only a single course to teach them the basics of Urdu since they already in effect speak it. For a family in Karnataka or Tamil Nadu or West Bengal to send their child to a madrasa for several years to learn Urdu represents, as a practice, an aspiration to national and to a lesser extent, even global Muslim identity

**Peterson, Mark Allen Dr.** [petersm2 at muohio.edu](mailto:petersm2@muohio.edu)

*Wed Dec 22 16:38:43 PST 2010*

Tom's and Kathryn's comments and questions are good to end with because (like Elisenda) they cut to the chase. In essence, they are asking, what exactly are the cultural/semiotic mechanisms by which the processes you claim are occurring take place?

I was going to answer them together, but alas I'm not sure I'll be able to get to Kathryn's before the deadline, so I'll answer Tom's here and Kathryn's later if I get the chance.

I first encountered Silverstein's work on indexicality through his brilliant, if somewhat esoterically expressed, paper on shifters. I read it in graduate school, and it transformed the way I thought about culture. As I moved into the use of the vocabulary of practice theory to articulate my interpretations of my ethnographic work, I always read Giddens, Bourdieu and the others against notions of indexicality and I think this comes across in a great deal of my work.

In semiotic questions I am a Peircean. Peirce is attractive because he poses the central questions of signification in ways that are useful for ethnography. For Peirce, a sign is not something (signifier) that stands for something else (signified), as it seems to be for de Saussure, Levi-Strauss and Barthes. A sign is something (signifier) that stands for something else (signified) in some way (symbolically, iconically, indexically) in some context (interpretant). The interpretant can be an individual human mind or even a physical state (Peirce thought of the growth of crystals as a semiotic process and probably would have felt the same way about DNA) but for my purposes is a social context or, in the parlance of practice theory, a social field.

Peirce also draws out attention to the fact that a sign can be indexical in some contexts and iconic or symbolic in others, and even serve multiple functions, indexical and symbolic or iconic at the same time. And because indexicality often relies on unequally distributed

knowledge, the same signs can be indexical to some persons while not being indexical signs to someone else.

All of which is a long segue into saying of Tom's

The key question for me, then, is always "indexical in what ways? to whom? in what contexts?"

All of which is a prelude to my answer to Tom's question as to whether "the revitalization of the Urdu press has enregistered a first-order indexicality of Muslim identity vis-à-vis a second-order indexicality of pan-Indianness?" which is:

Sure. That's one possible set of indexical meanings but not the only one. Perhaps one might divide the "palimpsest" of indexical meanings I describe into three "domains" and then suggest that each has at least two or more orders of indexicality. But these overlap and co-exist in peoples reading practices and in the narratives they offer about Urdu news.

Best,  
Mark Allen Peterson

**Postill, John J.** [Postill at shu.ac.uk](mailto:John.Postill@shu.ac.uk)

*Thu Dec 23 00:05:09 PST 2010*

Dear All

Our e-seminar on Mark Peterson's Urdu news paper has now come to an end. Many thanks to Mark for going beyond the call of duty at a very busy time of the year, to our discussant Ursula Rao and to all you who've put time aside to read and comment on the paper.

As always, we're looking for a volunteer who can spare 60-80 min. to transcribe the e-seminar onto a word document so that we can put it online - a simple task requiring little more than an ability to copy and paste. In fact, we'd be grateful for TWO or more volunteers as we still haven't been able to transcribe our previous session (on digital and media anthropology) for lack of manpower. Please remember that this network can only operate if we share the workload! More on this from Philipp Budka shortly.

We'll be back on 18 Jan with a working paper by Joseph Oduro-Frimpong (Southern Illinois University Carbondale) entitled "Sakawa: On Occultic Rituals and Cyberfraud in Ghanaian Popular Cinema". Here is the abstract:

In contemporary Ghana, popular narratives allege that a cyberfraud practice, common among the youth, is closely aligned with dangerous occultic ritual practices. This practice, popularly labeled as sakawa, has captured widespread attention in the Ghanaian sociopolitical sphere. In this paper, I seek to understand how this criminal practice is critiqued in Ghana. I investigate this quest through popular Ghanaian video-film series on sakawa as well as media reports of some Ghanaian political elites' position on the matter.

Then in February we'll be holding an e-discussion on Wikileaks chaired by Martijn de Koning (Radboud University, Nijmegen) and there'll be other e-seminars throughout 2011 - details to follow after the holidays.

As if that weren't enough, we're also planning a Media Anthropology Network meeting at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, for early May. There'll be an announcement on this in January.

Merry Xmas!

John