

**Comments on Mark A. Peterson's EASA Media Anthropology Network Working Paper
“Indexicality, iconicity and language ideology in the Urdu news revival”**

by
Ursula Rao
(University of New South Wales)

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 low middle classes and barely literate).

Kind regards, Ursula