

Soft Power of Punjabi: Language in the Domain of Pleasure

Tariq Rahman

Beaconhouse National University, Lahore, Pakistan

Punjabi is the identity marker of the Sikh community in east Punjab (India) and is the language of a large, powerful and fairly literate majority in west Punjab (Pakistan). The existing research on it focuses on its use in the domains of power and concludes that, excepting east Punjab, it does not have a significant presence across the rest of India, and is neglected and marginalized in west Punjab. This paper argues that the Punjabi language has “soft power” in the sense that it is used in the domains of pleasure: private conversation, bonding, intimacy, jokes, songs and celebrations. Moreover, it has a prominent role in films, theatre and drama. The Punjabi presence is prominent even in films using Hindi. The Punjabi identity, defined by accent, words, snatches of conversation in the Punjabi language and sartorial markers (turban, etc.) is presented as generous, romantic, brave, happy-go-lucky and fond of life. This image gives a positive value to the Punjabi community as a whole.

The present article intends to study Punjabi in Pakistan and India in order to find out whether Punjabi has any kind of formal power, i.e. the kind of power which is used in such domains of activity as governance, judicature, education, research and the instruments of coercion (military, police, intelligence etc.). The basic facts are that in Pakistan, where most speakers of the language live now, it is not used in any of these domains. It is, however, used in many of them at all levels in the Indian state of Punjab. However, outside that state, it is not used in such domains in India either. Hence, the aim of this article is to find out whether Punjabi is to be considered as a powerless language because of its lack of use, or use restricted to a small locale and population, respectively in Pakistan and India.

Theoretical Framework

First, let us define the concept of “power” as used in this article. The term power is used for the ability of a language to bring any kind of gratification for its users (for this definition see Rahman 1996, 8 and Rahman 2002, 42-43). Earlier research on Punjabi has referred to power but has taken the state as its unit of analysis because of which it has failed to take gratifications other than getting employment (wealth, prestige and controlling people) in account. Thus, in writing about the Sikhs during periods of crisis such as that of the partition of 1947 or the anti-Sikh violence of 1984 in Delhi, the focus is on violence and not on pleasure, and the community is seen as in conflict with other communities. Chaman Lal, judging the image of the Sikh in Hindi literature, argues that there are two images of the community:

One, that of a fundamentalist and terrorist, who is cruel even to his fellow followers in the movement, another that of traditionally liberal devout Sikh youth, who cannot kill an innocent person and is killed by his mentors (Lal 317).

Urdu literature has similar images, but all of them are from the memories of the riots of 1947 about which the Sikh and Punjabi Hindus have similar memories about Muslim Punjabis too (Ahmed; Das 457). But the trauma of the violence of 1947 was such that, in the view of Srijana Mitra Das, it created a self-censorship among film makers, who thus avoided the partition and created its opposite—a make-believe world which, in the case of our focus on the Punjab, we will call the world of Punjabi identity or *Punjabiyyat* (Das 454).

Besides this reference to the use of power in conflict in certain volatile situations, social science research has concentrated on power as manifested in state authority and its effect upon the distribution of wealth and privilege. Thus Rahman, in his analysis of the Punjabi language movement in Pakistan and the teaching of the language, has referred to the non-use of the language in the domains of power by the state and concluded that it lacks power (Rahman 2002, 380-424). However, Rahman does concede that there is a certain nexus of Punjabi with pleasure. He also suggests, though in passing, that Punjabi is associated with some “essential Punjabi identity” and that Pakistani Punjabis enjoy it and retain it “especially for male bonding, in the informal and oral domains” (395). But none of these suggestions and brief remarks are developed into a coherent theory positing a distinct role for Punjabi outside the domains of power. The problem with this form of analysis is that it ignores what I call “soft power,” i.e. the capability of

being used in the popular realms of pleasure and of indexing an identity with certain positive qualities.

Farina Mir has argued that Punjabi was used for cultural production outside the state-controlled domains of power, and this is the situation which obtains now in Pakistan (Mir 92). She has also pointed out the use of Punjabi in the domains of pleasure: in the celebrations of saints (*urs*) and by professional entertainers like *doms*, *Bhaats* and *Mirasis*. Similarly, Pritam Singh has argued that a certain global Punjabi identity has been created in the diaspora. This identity, "*Punjabiyyat*," as it is called, is a matter of shared "leisure consumption" including music, embroidery, painting, sculpture, dance and humor, cooking and eating and so on (Singh 2012, 154-155). This long list of activities evokes images of shared life patterns and experiences common to Punjabi Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims and Christians and hence, in a sense, tries to transcend the acute and acerbic cleavages of history, religion and national identities. The notion relevant for this paper given by Singh is that Punjabi identity is now defined by international Punjabi conferences, magazines, websites, translation and transliteration facilitated by the internet, and so on. The gist of these new styles of communication and representation is that a certain Punjabi identity which is more glamorous than before has been created and it is not based on governance or military force (155-161). This is what I call "soft power" which is otherwise a term used in international relations for persuasion wielded by states through non-military, mostly cultural, means. Hollywood, for instance, is an example of the USA's "soft power" as opposed to its military muscle which is hard power. This article uses the concept of soft power for the kind of power which makes for the creation of a better image for a community without necessarily being used in the domains of power or even promoted by the state. This is the kind of power this article focuses upon. It should be said at the outset that this kind of soft power of Punjabi has been noted by researchers, some mentioned above, without, however, using that theoretical construct.

To understand the position of Punjabi one must refer to the concept of linguistic capital as used by Pierre Bourdieu. Briefly, this capital operates in a cultural market and produces "a profit of distinction on the occasion of each social exchange" (164). Bourdieu further goes on to suggest that linguistic exchanges are relations of symbolic power and that this is invisible and those who are acted upon by this power and also those who exercise it are not always aware of what is going on (*ibid.*). Normally this is applied to societies for the use of upper-class sociolects versus non-standard or less valued forms of speech. Every time one

uses the valued form one gets a profit in intangible, symbolic forms. The use of this speech is an act of power whether one is aware of it or not. But the same ideas can be used for understanding how Punjabi operates in the two Punjabs of South Asia. While the language has little value in the linguistic marketplace for lucrative and powerful employment, it is useful in popular culture. It produces social profit in certain situations but this is subject to certain conditions which will be discussed later.

It also links with social identity. Here the theory of indexicality (Ochs; Silverstein) gives us an understanding of the way Punjabi is associated with a certain kind of positive quintessentially Punjabi identity which is more to be experienced at the informal level than recorded in formal documents. The perception of this identity is by itself valuable in certain contexts. Asif Agha's theory of enregisterment tells us how this identity is acted out in the contexts where it confers value. Punjabi is "indexical of speaker attributes by a population of language users" (38). And these attributes are recognized (enregistered) by the Punjabis themselves as well as other people as the attributes of warmth, generosity, earthy humor and spontaneity etc. Though these attributes are associated with all Punjabis as presented in the media and through myth, our observations are confined to the way urban, educated Punjabis, fluent in English, Urdu and Hindi, act out a certain desiderated identity through interjections in Punjabi. For such interaction "identity is actively, ongoingly, dynamically constituted in discourse" (Benwell and Stokoe 49). The language mediates this identity which is constructed for the moment to achieve social results—bonding, intimacy, humor—or to exploit the positive image constructed by the entertainment industry about Punjabis.

The author is a participant observer of Punjabi as spoken in Pakistani Punjab and has observed conversations, social events and family interactions since childhood. Moreover, for this article a number of Punjabis from both Pakistan and India were questioned unobtrusively in extended conversations in Pakistan, the United States and Britain. These conversations were not recorded, in order that people should behave as naturally and candidly as possible. However, interviewees were told that the gist of their reported behavior and perceptions would be used for research without naming them. The observations upon which judgments about the use of the soft power of Punjabi by speakers of the language are from naturally occurring situations in Lahore and cities of England and the U.S. where Muslim, Hindu and Sikh Punjabis are found. The time of the conversations is about five years ago, when this article was conceived.

The Profile of Punjabi

Punjabi is the eleventh most widely spoken language in the world. In South Asia—to be exact in the northern part of the Subcontinent—it is the third most widely spoken language and, since there is a large Punjabi diaspora in Britain, it is the fourth most widely spoken language in England and Wales. The following table illustrates this.

Table 1: Major Punjabi-speaking populations

Pakistan	76,335,300
India	29,109,672
UK	2,300,000
Canada	800,000
UAE	720,000
Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/punjabi-people	

Next, let us examine the position of Punjabi among the languages of Pakistan and India. Table 2 below illustrates this.

In short, Punjabi is the major mother tongue of most of the inhabitants of Pakistan despite the fact that there are complaints by language activists that urban, educated Punjabis often declare Urdu, not Punjabi, as their mother tongue in the census. Moreover, some Punjabi language activists consider *Siraiki* and *Hindko* as mutually intelligible varieties of their language and hence argue that the figures for Punjabi should be nearly sixty percent. But even discounting these claims, Punjabi is a major mother tongue and, indeed, the reported mother tongue of the majority of the population of Pakistan. And yet, it is not the language of any of the domains of power. It is not a medium of instruction at any level, though it is an optional subject in school and college and there is a master's degree available in it. Is this because of any legal obstacle? Let us examine the legal aspects of this issue.

Table 2: Punjabi speakers in India and Pakistan

India			
	Population	Punjabi Speakers	Percentage
1971	548,159,652	14,108,443	2.57
1981	665,287,849	19,611,199	2.95
1991	838,583,988	23,378,744	2.79
2001	1,028,610,328	29,102,477	2.83
Pakistan			
	Population	Punjabi Speakers	Percentage
1972	65,309,340	43,176,004	56.11
1981	84,253,644	40,584,980	48.17
1998	132,352,279	58,433,431	44.15
<u>Sources:</u> Pakistan Census 2001, p. 107; Indiaonlinepages.com \ population \ literacyrateinIndia			

Language policies: The Legal Position

In Pakistan, in theory at least, Punjabi may be used for teaching and other purposes if the provincial legislature so decides (1973 *Constitution of Pakistan*, Article 251C). However, despite demand by language activists for Punjabi, this has not happened. A recent attempt by Nazeer Kahut, the convener of the Punjabi Language Movement, to get the Punjab Assembly to declare Punjabi the official language of the Punjab was not successful (*Dawn*, 31 Dec. 2011). This would be understandable if the Punjabis were a mostly rural, illiterate and politically

apathetic community. However, the Punjabis are a powerful and educated linguistic group in both countries as the present literacy rates will illustrate.

Table 3: Literacy in India and Pakistan

Country	India	Pakistan
Population	1.28 billion	29 million
Literacy (%)	74.04 (in 2011)	76.7 (in 2015)
Source: www.indiaonlinepages.com/population/literacy_rate_in_india.html		

Besides being more literate than other communities, at least in Pakistan, the Punjabi majority is not a weak majority. In India it is an important part of the armed forces and the film industry. In Pakistan the Punjabi elite rules the country through its dominance in the army, the bureaucracy, the media and the financial sector. The Pakistani Punjabi elite, however, never chose to make any language, neither their own nor any other indigenous mother-tongue of Pakistan, a national language. The reasons for this are political and historical. The political rationale is that Urdu is a symbol of unity and helps in creating a unified “Pakistani” identity. In this symbolic role, it serves the political purpose of resisting ethnicity which would otherwise break the federation. The historical reason is closely connected. It is that Urdu and Islam were symbols of the resurgent Muslim identity in British India and, hence, they are organically connected with Pakistani nationalism.

Besides the oft-reiterated political reason that the Punjabi elite wants to dominate other ethnic communities and thus does not promote its own language so as to encourage other ethnic communities to eschew linguistic nationalism, it seems to me to be a matter of the Punjabi attitude towards their language. It is one of culture shame; of shamefaced embarrassment. On the one hand, Punjabis will show affection for their language, and on the other, they have contempt for it. Moreover, they have invested so deeply and for so long in Urdu—Lahore was a center for publication in Urdu as well as teaching in it since the British period (Rahman 2011, 331-334)—that sheer cultural inertia and over a century of using Urdu as the language of education, culture and good breeding have made it difficult for the Punjabis to use their language in the domains of power.

Punjabi in India

In the Indian state of the Punjab, created on November 1st, 1966, Punjabi speakers are 2.83 percent of the total population of India. Yet, Punjabi is one of the languages in the twenty-two scheduled languages of India. It is also the official language of the Punjab state in India where it is written in the Gurmukhi script. It is used in schools as a medium of instruction and also in the Punjabi universities for some subjects. It is also used at all levels for official business within the state. According to Pritam Singh, it is necessary to know the language in order to obtain state jobs (Singh, 2016). It is a language of the media being used in the television, radio and print. Among the newspapers which print in it are the daily *Ajit*, *Jagbani* and *Punjabi Tribune*. The TV channels are Day and Night, GET Punjabi, Zee Punjabi, Chardikla, Time TV, PTC Punjab, JUS Punjabi, ABP Sanjha, etc. (Punjabi Newspapers, 2015). A huge digitized collection of literature, folk items and other cultural products has been created in the language. It is also the language of songs, film dialogues and humor. Indeed, even in the Hindi films of Bollywood whenever a light hearted or good humored person or scene is to be shown, the characters speak Hindi with a Punjabi accent. In the drama series called "*Kareena Kareena*" the Punjabi heroine Kareena and her compatriots are large hearted, generous, courageous and innovative. In short, putting the image of the Punjabi in the army and the films, it is that of a brave, generous, hospitable and good humored people. This is certainly a very positive image to have and reflects the soft power of the language. Let us now turn in greater detail to the attitude of the Pakistani Punjabis towards their language.

The Surface Attitudes of Pakistani Punjabis Towards their Language

There have been several surveys about the attitudes of Punjabis towards their language in Pakistan. As it is in this country that there is a Punjabi majority which patronizes English and Urdu in the official domains rather than Punjabi, let us look at the results of these surveys. A survey carried out by the US Aid on primary education in 1986 revealed that about sixty-five percent of the interviewees in the Punjab were against the teaching of Punjabi even in the first three classes of school. Even this number might be high because "the Siraiki speaking sections wanted it taught and/or used all day" because language identity is stronger there (Jones et al. 38). Later, Sabiha Mansoor found, in her survey of linguistic attitudes of students in Lahore, that they placed languages in a

hierarchy in which English was at the top, Urdu came second and Punjabi stood at the bottom (Mansoor). In 1996 a field survey carried out by the Punjab University's Institute of Education and Research revealed that peoples' attitudes towards Punjabi had not changed since the partition (and earlier). Parents still preferred Urdu and English for instrumental reasons. Teachers still felt they did not have enough command over Punjabi to be able to teach in it. Students were still not positive towards it. But a number of people did agree that there should be no difficulty about teaching it at the primary level (Chishti). Rahman carried out a survey of students and teachers about the desirability of teaching Punjabi in 1999. The results of the survey are in Table 4, below.

Table 4: demand for Punjabi by students (percentage of students)

Students who desire Punjabi:	<i>Madrasas</i> (N = 131)	Punjabi-speakers (N=372)	Urdu-medium (N=520)	English-medium (N=97)	Cadet Colleges (N=86)	Ordinary (N=119)
as a medium of instruction	Nil	Nil (with English 0.27)	0.57 (with other lang.)	2.06	Nil	0.84
as the only language taught as a subject	0.76	0.27	0.38	Nil	Nil	Nil
to be taught along with other languages	6.87	13.17	11.54	5.15	3.49	6.72
as the lang. of provincial jobs	4.58	16.94	0.19	6.19 (with Urdu and English)	2.33 (with Urdu & English)	Nil

* Students who have ticked merely "the language of the majority the people" have not been included in any category above except that of Punjabi speakers.

Source: See Rahman 2002, Appendices 14.7 and 14.18. Question 3, given in full in Appendix 14, has been broken into two parts here. All figures, except those in brackets, are percentages (for the original see Rahman 2002, Appendix 14).

It is not strange at all that students do not prefer to be educated in Punjabi as their main reason for seeking and education is to empower themselves through it. But,

as compared to the percentages of those who desire to be educated in the language, those who desire provincial jobs in it are much higher (16.94 percent). In short, they pragmatically choose to be educated in the languages of formal power but prefer that at least some domains of state power should operate in their language.

As for the domains of power, they operated in Persian and then in English and Urdu in the Punjab. Hence educated Punjabis internalized the prejudices of British officers and their Urdu-speaking Indian subordinates (the *amlah*) who operated in Urdu at the lower levels. British district officers were asked the question as to what should be the official vernacular language i.e. the language of the lower administration, the courts, the medium of instruction in government schools etc. after the establishment of British rule in the Punjab in 1851. Most of them regarded Punjabi as an uncouth patois, a mere dialect and totally unfit for any formal use (for the letters see Nazir 1977; for the summary and comments see Rahman 1996, 194-196).

But are these survey results relevant for all domains? My view is that the language ideology which survey instruments reveal, do not tell the nuanced story since the respondents answer questions about Punjabi with respect to officially approved linguistic hierarchies. They look at the functions of the language in the domains of formal state power and find Punjabi relegated to a zero or nearly zero functional role and take their cue from this reality. The realm of pleasure is considered outside the boundary of formal surveys and research and hence Punjabi is placed below English and Urdu in the linguistic hierarchy in peoples' minds. To understand the soft power of Punjabi, therefore, it is useful to look at its use in the realm of pleasure, informal use and the way it indexes a positive identity.

Punjabi for Male Bonding and the Coming of Age Ritual

One of the arguments which people present half-jokingly in private gatherings is that Punjabi is a "vulgar" language. Their main argument is that there are more words relating to sexual parts and acts in it than in any other language. This charge has been brought against Punjabi by no less a person than Mian Tufail Mohammad, once the head of the religious party, Jamat-e-Islami, in 1992 (Rahman 2002, 403). But, while this is taken as a negative trait in the formal domains of public debate and education, it is precisely this sexual load which so endears it to men for bonding with each other. Consider the following examples from the

spontaneous conversation of youths between the ages of 16 to 20 in Lahore. The actual utterances are not quoted but the use of words with sexual connotations is noted.

- (1) *Lenal dena*: the literal meaning in both Punjabi and Urdu is taking and giving. However, the words also stand for “having sex with” or penetrating someone’s body; and “allowing someone to use one’s body for sexual gratification” or getting sexually penetrated.
- (2) *Marna/ marvana*: the literal meaning is “to hit or beat” and “to be hit or beaten.” The words mean the same as *lenal dena* above.
- (3) *Vajana/ vajna*: literal meaning is to play a musical instrument. The words also mean the same as the above pair.
- (4) Leaving words unuttered after possessives:
 - (a) *Teri*: yours but nothing is mentioned after the possessive implying sexual organs.
 - (b) *Oh di*: hers/ his used as above.
 - (c) *Unan di*: theirs meaning as in (a) but for more than one person.

The oft-heard observation from Punjabi men that everything can have a sexual meaning in Punjabi is, of course, factually incorrect because such ambiguity can be part of the verbal repertoire of other languages too. All the words and verbal strategies given above are used in Urdu also but it is Punjabi which has the reputation of being a “vulgar” language. Utterances with the above four major linguistic strategies are used in jokes, repartee and insults. They are used to act out the role of adults by urban youths in a sort of coming of age ritual when a macho persona requires the use of sexually ambiguous statements. The youths who were observed participating in this mutual teasing play or enjoying the vicarious pleasure of talking about females were students of English-medium institutions more fluent in Urdu and English than in their own mother-tongue which they hardly ever used as children at home. Yet, in such verbal jousts they assumed, or aligned themselves with, a new social role. This “role alignment is identifiable as the causal result of an individual’s conscious, strategic choices” (Agha 53). One of these choices is to use Punjabi and participate in jokes and verbal repartee which marks the in-group. This kind of use of Punjabi is reported from Britain also. It appears that Punjabi adolescent boys use the language, especially the swear words in it, to mark their coming-of-age. The affectionate contempt in which the language is held by its speakers (Mobbs 245) itself suggests

that it may be put to the construction of subaltern identities and “off the record” bonds of linguistic sharing and bonding. Such uses confer upon Punjabi the value of being a socially cohesive force; a medium for bonding; and a means for expressing informality, spontaneity and the grownup status for young males.

In informal gatherings of adult men too, jokes are best narrated in Punjabi. Their earthiness, best expressed in the mother tongue, is not deemed fit for female ears at least in public, hence they serve to create a certain bonding and bonhomie among the men. This is reported by prisoners of wars in the 1971 war who were in camps supervised by Sikhs and from occasional meetings of Punjabis in foreign countries. These are private functions connected with pleasure which can be instantly denied as it is perceived to be sneaked despite the official discourse of sobriety and high-minded educated pleasures available in Urdu. Indeed, in addition to the two sub-realms of pleasure: the high-culture humor in Urdu and the low-status, somewhat risqué, mostly male sub-culture in Punjabi one can differentiate between the domains in which these languages operate.

Punjabi in the Realm of Pleasure

If one searches for “Punjabi in Bollywood” one gets 24,600,000 results, and one common theme is that the film industry is saturated with Punjabi influence (Venkat). Although Punjabi cinema, called Pollywood, is only a \$7.9 million industry compared to Bollywood’s \$630 million (Cinema Punjab, 2015) and there were only 26 films in Punjabi versus 221 in Hindi (not counting those in its dialects which came to 152 in their own right) in the year 2012 (Cinema India, table of films), yet the Punjabi presence is very prominent in films. This is partly because of the famous Punjabi families which have been associated with films as actors and directors, such as the Sahnis, Anands, Chopras, Puris, Khannas, Kapurs, Bedis, Dutts, Deols and Singhs. In a very cogently argued article Das suggests that the filmmaker Yash Chopra created, perhaps in order to conceal or sidestep the trauma of the partition of 1947, “a particular kind of Punjabi world in film, displaying the delights, modern aspirations and traditional values of Punjabinyat as remembered, imagined and commercially estimated by mainstream filmmakers” (Das 454). This *Punjabinyat* is not dependent on using the Punjabi language. One may only speak a few witty lines in Punjabi or in the Punjabi accent but one should be seen as a Punjabi character. Punjabi films often show Punjabis to be full-blooded, passionate, romantic and loyal as lovers. For instance, the films “Shaheed-e-Mohabbat Boota Singh” and “Veer Zara” both show Indian

Punjabi heroes risking their lives for the girl of their desire. In short, Indian cinema, though mostly in Hindi, show Punjabis in a good light and their language is marked as the carrier of this soft image. Despite the fact that nationalism—this time Indian nationalism—does sneak in, but the main message of *Punjabiyyat* makes such films as popular in Pakistan as they are in India and the diaspora.

Punjabi is a very important language in Pakistani cinema. Despite the fact that Punjabi is not the medium of instruction at any level in any educational institution in Pakistan nor is it used in important jobs, it is the language of entertainment and the first film in Punjabi, “Sheila” or “*Pind di Kuri*” (“the girl of the village”) was produced in 1935 in Calcutta. Since then many Punjabi films have been produced, and in Pakistan they surpassed Urdu ones after 1978. Alyssa Ayres explains this by referring to Farina Mir’s work which suggests that Punjabi moved to “spheres beyond those constrained by state practices” (Ayres 101). These have been defined at length by Pritam Singh, who uses the concept of *Punjabiyyat* as ranging from cooking to enjoyment (Singh 154-155). Both Singh and Ayres claim that *Punjabiyyat* is not contingent upon the printed word which, according to Benedict Anderson, constructs “imagined communities.” Instead, these communities are imagined through other cultural practices such as watching films in the language (Singh 154; Ayres 103). I would support these notions going back to Farina Mir’s work on the way the legend of *Heer Ranjha*, two archetypal lovers of the Punjab, was performed and shared between religious communities (Mir). Thus, out of a total of 4,026 films from 1948 to June 2012 in Pakistan, 1347 films, i.e. 33.46 percent, are in Punjabi. In addition, 141 films (3.53 percent) were issued in Punjabi as well as Urdu. If we add the seven films in Siraiiki (.17 per cent), a language intelligible to Punjabi-speakers and vice versa, we get close to 37.16 per cent films in what could be called Greater Punjabi. This is an impressive number, especially if we keep in mind that even Bengali, the language of 55.6 percent of people before the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, was used only in 117 films, i.e. 2.91 percent. Sindhi, a language spoken by 11.77 percent of people and, like Bengali, the identity symbol of ethnic movements (Rahman 1996, 79-102), was used only in 73 films (1.81 percent). This is illustrated in Table 5, below.

Table 5: Film Production by Language, 1948-2012

Language	Number of Films	Percentage of films	Percentage of language speakers
Urdu	1588	39.44	7.60
Punjabi	1347	33.46	48.17
Pashto	715	17.76	13.14
Bengali	117	2.91	
Double	177	4.40	As above
Sindhi	73	1.81	11.77
Siraiki	07	0.17	9.83
Gujrati	02	0.05	Not known
Total	4,026	100	

Source: Reports of the Film Censor Board Government of Pakistan 1948 – 2012.

In interviews, people involved in the Punjabi and Urdu film industry explained the increase in the number of Punjabi in various ways. The former East Pakistan was a big market for Urdu films “and contributed around thirty-three per cent of the total investment in production” (Gazdar 124) and this market vanished after 1971. Songwriter Ahmad Aqeel Ruby said that this was because Punjabi was the language of ordinary people and Punjabi films were exhibited in cinema halls in the small towns of the country. He also said that Punjabi was understood everywhere in the country and appealed more to the people than Urdu which was an urban language and was considered formal rather than popular. Director Syed Noor said that Punjabi films were cheaper to make, which is why they are popular. Director Hasan Askari also agreed that Punjabi films were not only less expensive to produce but they also paid more as they were distributed in small towns. But the fact is that the release of Punjabi films per year outstripped Urdu ones in 1971, and then continued to do so except in some years. The variety of Punjabi used in these films was said by Askari to be the “soft” language of Lahore. This urban variety, including Urdu words, may be more widely intelligible than the other region-bound varieties of the language. The most famous hero of Punjabi films, Sultan Rahi (1938-1996), whose real name was Muhammad Sultan, was born and brought up in Rawalpindi and spoke Potohari as a mother tongue, but could use other dialects of Punjabi if the character required it. For instance, Hasan Askari said that he used the dialect of Sargodha in his film “Waehshijat” (“Wild Jat”). His heroine, Aasia, was not a native speaker of this variety but the writer, Nasir Adeeb, was. As director, Askari himself corrected

the accent of the heroine. However, when Agha G.A. Gul (1913-83) produced the Punjabi film "Mundri," the Bengali Director, Daud Chand, did not know Punjabi well and yet did his job. In such cases directors have informal assistance. For instance, Shaukat Hussain Rizvi, Noorjahan's husband, directed the Punjabi film "Chanway" but it was Noorjahan who helped him out with the language (Gazdar 37-38).

The place of music, singing and dancing in Punjabi culture is a subject of scholarly debate. Traditional performers, though belonging to the service groups, gained access to rich and powerful patrons as Doms, Mirasis, Dhadis, Bhands and Naqqals (Schreffler 10-21). However, though they are still seen at social functions, it is because of the amateur performances of young people that Punjabi is considered a language of fun.

Teasing, Flirtation and Fun in Punjabi

The author has attended many weddings of Punjabis both in the diaspora (in the U.K. and the U.S.A.) and in Pakistan. One common feature of these was that people chose Punjabi as the language of singing, teasing, flirtation and fun. They sang songs in Punjabi even when they were either not mother-tongue speakers of the language or used Urdu and English in their daily lives. They often joined in singing the song "*lang a ja patan chinah de yar lang a ja*" ("come across the river Chenab O Lover! Cross over the ford of the river"). The most popular songs were the *mahias*. These are short songs with the tag of *mahia*, i.e. lover, in which the first line is only for setting the rhyme. In Punjabi weddings in both India and Pakistan the *mahias* are verbal duels between the bride's and the bridegroom's friends and relations. In one marriage, in Rawalpindi in 2009, the *mahia* competition began with a girl from Lahore throwing the following challenge to the girls from Rawalpindi. The audience was immediately enthusiastic when the *mahia* started with the ritualistic challenge:

Main kuri Lahore shahr di
Kade tappeon wich nayi hari
 I am a girl of Lahore city
 I have never been defeated in a competition of *tappas*

This challenge was responded to by the lead singer from Rawalpindi, who made the same boastful claim. Then the verbal battle ensued and the boys, though excluded in the conservative family hosting the event, either joined in or cheered the singers on the sidelines. In another marriage in Lahore which the author

attended, the *tappas* became an occasion for flirtation between a boy and a girl with the girl beginning by insulting him but ending by asking him to marry her by appealing to her mother:

Sini utte sini ae;
Tere nalon nayi vasna teri nuk zara phini ae.
 There is a tray on a tray;
 I cannot live with you since your nose is a bit flat.

Her last coy response is as follows:

Roti utte pa pista.
Mere kolon ki mangda?
Meri maan kolon mang rishta.
 Put pistachio over a loaf of bread.
 What do you seek from me?
 Ask for my hand from my mother.

Such *tappas*, sung by amateurs, otherwise used to speaking in other languages, create the impression of Punjabi marriages being more “fun.” They are also constructors of the idealized fun-loving Punjabi persona mentioned earlier.

If this potential ability to influence people positively in favour of an idealized Punjabi persona is taken as soft power, then Punjabi possesses soft power. Thus, while nobody who is proficient only in Punjabi is likely to obtain lucrative and powerful employment in the state or the private sector in both countries, the language does give its speaker a certain image. The language is indexed to “stereotypical social personae.” It is a register in Asif Agha’s theoretical model and its functions are as follows:

Registers are social formations in the sense that some language users but not others are socialized in their use and construals; thus every register has a social domain, a group of persons acquainted with - minimally capable of recognizing—the figures performable through use (Agha 39-40).

The examples of youths, men and young women given above are all of educated, multilingual speakers of the language who have middle-class status and command over the languages of power: English, Urdu and Hindi. These people construct and mediate their identities in certain situations of private pleasure where the identity is “performed, constructed, enacted and produced, moment-to-moment” (Benwell and Stokoe 49, emphasis original). When such people use Punjabi in certain social domains, they construct and perform an identity. Thus the language is indexed to the image of a carefree, generous, large hearted, brave

and good-humoured personality. This educated Punjabi, in turn, draws upon the image of the “typical” or idealized Punjabi from the popular cinema and soap operas who is shown as a loyal friend and a good companion. In the performances on the screen both men and women are given to dancing and singing and telling jokes. In reality, however, while in Pakistan there are religious taboos on female dancing, Punjabi young men are apt to break out into such dances (*bhangra*) on occasions of joy. At weddings even women dance, though generally only in the presence of women. The image in the media is that Punjabis express their *joie de vivre* through good eating and hearty laughter. Hence the term for Lahorites is *zindadillan-e-Lahore* (*zinda*, alive; *dilan*, hearts), though there is no city of Pakistan or India where people do not enjoy food as much as they can afford it.

In this construction of the stereotypical image the language, as well as the Punjabi accent while speaking other languages, is the main myth-maker. Thus there are “figures of personhood to speak of indexical images of speaker-actor in general terms” (Agha 39). The Punjabi film and songs have created a change in the Sikh image. According to Pritam Singh, the Sardar’s image has changed. He is “now a king, powerful, smart, sexy and glamorous” (Singh 161). I believe this image helps the Punjabis in that it constructs a positive perception of their ideal selves in other peoples’ minds. Moreover, besides the intellectual and academic events like conferences and translations mentioned above in the context of the diaspora, I should mention people like Nuzhat Abbas, an activist living in Oxford, England, who promotes reading of Punjabi among children through innovative methods. She and her husband, Abbas, also host events connected with Punjabi poets and mystic thought, and their house provides connections with an inclusive Punjabi diaspora community of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. Such endeavours and the creation of the song-and-film fun-loving Punjabi are manifestations of the soft power of Punjabi. Hence, attempts to dismiss Punjabi as a powerless language solely on the basis of its non-use or limited use in the domains of power needs to be corrected by a consideration of its soft power.

Conclusion

We have seen that Punjabi has soft power and this is not only useful in the private sphere of pleasure-seeking and fun but also builds solidarity among the speakers of the language, serves as a marker of informality and intimacy, and signals an identity at ease with its roots when it is used. In India, however, this identity is that of a minority which has been struggling for recognition, especially for its

separate province, so the limited use of the language in official domains of power—though these are subordinate ones—both serves symbolic purposes and fulfills the needs of the lower *salariat*, whose members find easy access to state jobs. In Pakistan the Punjabi-speaking majority is a confident and powerful group which does not need the language-based ethnic assertion of *Punjabiyyat* except in times of confrontation with political rivals (for example, Nawaz Sharif's opposition to Benazir Bhutto in the 1990's). For the most part this majority is part of the establishment and uses Urdu and Islam to confront the fissiparous tendencies generated by language-based ethnic identity. Moreover, the Punjabis regard themselves as the guardians of the two-nation theory, Muslim nationalism and a deep distrust of India which is regarded as "Hindu" and inimical in the Urdu press, the textbooks taught in schools (Rahman 2002, 509-516) and the publications of the army recently analyzed by Christine Fair (2009) and Aqil Shah (2014). Moreover, sheer inertia, prejudices and the habit of over a century precludes the desire for any real change in the status of Punjabi as far as the official domains of power are concerned.

But as far as the community-marking function of Punjabi in the domains of pleasure are concerned, Punjabi is endowed with soft power in Pakistan as it is in India. It serves to express solidarity, bonhomie, relaxed consciousness of being rooted to the soil and confidence. It constructs an identity which is an "intersubjectively achieved social and cultural phenomenon" (Bucholtz and Hall 607). For educated Punjabis it serves to present a positive identity with attributes such a humor, warmth, spontaneity and loyalty, etc. Moreover, the language is connected with the world of entertainment. Thus it is a language that people enjoy in large numbers for singing, watching movies and enjoying themselves outside the formal confines of the English and Urdu social worlds. In short, the use of Punjabi for identity projection and the enjoyment of the private domains of pleasure is not so insignificant a phenomenon as to receive so little attention as has usually been the case. This article is meant to provoke this debate and explore this role of Punjabi further.

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