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REVIEW ARTICLE

Language Ideological Hierarchisation in Madrasa in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This critical review examines the ideological hierarchisation of language within Pakistani Madaris as a lens into the entanglements of education, religion and identity in the Global South. The paper critiques how Arabic, Urdu and English are positioned across overlapping secular and religious systems by borrowing from concepts such as Bourdieu's symbolic power, critical theory and scholarship on the weaponisation of language. Given our focus on the currency and capital of language within the Madrasa context, we approach language hierarchies as performative forces that shape subjectivities, identities and ethical relations rather than as neutral tools of communication through an ethic-onto-epistemological lens. In doing so, we reframe language hierarchisation in Madaris as an intra-active process through which linguistic practices co-produce religious authority, moral boundaries and political effect. The analysis situates these hierarchies historically, highlights their reinforcement and contestation in Madrasa education, and considers their political use in relation to blasphemy, digital media and social control. The article concludes by proposing teacher education and ideological critique as pathways toward equitable practices that honour plurality and enact relational ethics within and beyond Pakistani Madaris.

1 | Introduction

Ideology remains one of the most contested concepts in the social sciences, described by McLellan (1986, 1) as 'the most elusive concept in the whole of social science'. According to Roucek (1944), ideology is a structured system of ideas and ideals that rationalises specific social arrangements and practices, thereby sustaining or reshaping the aspirations and values of a group or society. As Eagleton (1991) points out, ideologies function by reproducing dominant ways of thinking, which in turn sustain the social structures that generate them. In this sense, ideology operates not only as a system of belief but as a structuring force that organises perception, legitimacy and authority. Contemporary scholarship further understands ideology as dynamically enacted through discourse, affect and digital circulation, particularly in societies shaped by globalisation

and mediated communication (Freedon 2022; Jost et al. 2009; Syed 2024).

Education, as a key social institution, becomes a primary site for the production, contestation and reproduction of ideology. Within this context, education is not merely a process of knowledge transmission but also a crucial arena for ideological contestation and reinforcement (Becker 2023). According to Giroux (1984), schools function as cultural sites where ideologies are transmitted, contested and redefined, shaping the collective consciousness of future generations. As Meyer (1977, 66) succinctly puts it, 'educational systems themselves are thus, in a sense, ideologies. They rationalise in modern terms and remove from sacred and primordial explanations the nature and organisation of personnel and knowledge in modern society'. Leś (2024, 50) reinforces this view by noting that 'education is

a necessary condition (as a tool) for transmission of norms important in a given community ... this includes ideology'. Thus, the dual role of education, as both a perpetuator and challenger of ideologies, underscores its pivotal position in the social structure, actively participating in the creation and modification of societal norms and values.

As we transition from the aforementioned historical and global discourse on ideology and education, Pakistan's linguistic landscape—the focus of this paper—provides a compelling case study to examine how educational policies and language ideologies intertwine under the influence of historical and contemporary forces. The legacies of British colonial rule have deeply embedded English as a symbol of modernity and socioeconomic ascent, overshadowing local languages and educational frameworks (Ali 2025). Within this complex tapestry, Madrasa¹ represents a critical locus where national and colonial legacies meet distinct religious educational ideologies. At these religious institutions, Arabic is not just a language but a pillar of Islamic identity, serving both as a counterbalance and a challenge to the dominance of English and Urdu promoted by state policies (Hussain and Pentón Herrera 2024). As such, Madrasa provides a unique vantage point to explore the intersections of language, religion and identity, highlighting how the pressures of traditionalism and modern educational demands are negotiated within a linguistically diverse society.

In Pakistani Madaris, language ideologies position Arabic at the top of a hierarchical structure as the primary means of transmission, reflecting its unparalleled importance within these institutions (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994). While different religions may hierarchise languages differently from one another (e.g., Sanskrit in Hinduism), such religious configurations contrast with state-driven language hierarchies, such as those shaping mainstream education in Pakistan. Given the already stratified mainstream language education (Tamim 2014), Pakistan is an ideal case study of the postcolonial baggage of English. In this context, there are strong ties to nationalistic identity with Urdu, and ethnic connectivity with regional languages such as Punjabi and Pashto. At the same time, as Urdu remains the primary language of communication among the nation's multiethnic groups, regional languages provide a sense of ethnocultural belonging. In this critical review, we employ Bourdieu's (1991) work as a lens to examine the symbolic power of languages vis-à-vis their socio-religious context in Madaris in Pakistan, including the positionality of the English language. In Pakistan, Madaris are institutions where modernity challenges morality and raises questions about whether to *remain* traditional or *adopt contemporary methods*, while struggling to preserve traditional religious values.

As a note of importance, and in alignment with the aims of this Special Issue, we approach the language hierarchies observed in Pakistani Madaris as dynamic configurations that bring together epistemology, ontology and ethics—shaping not only what is known, but also how individuals come to be and act justly within educational and religious contexts. Drawing on Barad's (2007) concept of ethic-onto-epistemology, which underscores the inseparability of knowing, being and doing, we understand language in this context as a performative force that materialises identities, power relations and religious affiliations.

The valorisation of Arabic, the instrumentalisation of Urdu, and the marginalisation of English and regional languages are reflections of both ideological constructs and co-constitutive of educational realities, subjectivities and moral boundaries within Madaris. Through this framing, we recognise that language represents more than pedagogical choices in these educational spaces; it functions as an ethical enactment shaped by, and shaping, complex sociopolitical and religious worlds. By situating our critique within a Global South ethic-onto-epistemological lens (Marn and Wolgemuth 2021; Trinh 2024), we aim to advance the argument that language, through its intra-actions² (Barad 2007)—that is, through its relational enactments and positioning within hierarchies—actively shapes, produces and sustains ideological formations.

This paper critically examines the conditions and rationales that support ideological language hierarchisation in the Global South, with particular attention to the intersecting forces at play within Pakistani Madaris. We frame these institutions as situated within what might be considered the South of the Global South (i.e., communities that experience multiple, layered forms of marginalisation due to colonial histories, geopolitical positioning and internal hierarchies), making them a particularly compelling and urgent case for engaging with the themes of this Special Issue.

Existing scholarship has examined ideology in schooling and the sociolinguistic dynamics of the Pakistani Madrasa (Ashraf 2018; Hussain and Pentón Herrera 2024; Rahman 1996, 1998; Umrani and Shah 2025). Using that body of work as a foundation, we conceptualise language hierarchisation in Madaris through an ethic-onto-epistemological lens that foregrounds language as an intra-active force shaping subjectivities, moral boundaries and political affect. Rather than treating language solely as symbolic capital or as a neutral medium of instruction, we position it as materially and ethically entangled in the production of religious authority and social belonging. By linking institutional language practices in Madaris to broader contemporary processes of mediation and ideological mobilisation, we reframe how language hierarchies operate within and beyond these religious educational spaces. Notably, in this critical review, we synthesise and interrogate historical, sociolinguistic and critical educational scholarship on language policy, ideology and Madrasa education in Pakistan. The analysis traces how language hierarchies have become naturalised across colonial, national and religious domains, thereby foregrounding the power relations and epistemic assumptions embedded in those processes.

This critical review is structured into four main sections to thoroughly examine the phenomenon of language hierarchisation within Pakistan, a country emblematic of complex linguistic dynamics in the Global South. The first section introduces the foundational concepts of language ideologies and hierarchisation, contextualised within Pakistan's colonial and postcolonial history. The second section examines how these hierarchies are enacted and maintained within Madrasa settings, where Arabic holds a symbolic and sacred dominance. The third section interrogates the political weaponisation of language, highlighting how ideologies surrounding Arabic and English are strategically mobilised to regulate beliefs, behaviours and belonging. The final section synthesises these insights to envision how teacher

education and ideological awareness can offer alternative educational futures grounded in relational ethics and critical pedagogy. In our view, this paper contributes to the broader discourse on language, power and religiosity in education, with a particular focus on how English, Arabic and Urdu are positioned within the ideological architectures of Madaris in Pakistan and beyond (Jaffrelot and Louër 2017).

2 | Setting the Stage: Language Hierarchisation in Pakistan

Since this manuscript is concerned with language ideological hierarchisation in Madaris in Pakistan, it is necessary to traverse the historical domain across approximately half a millennium, and beyond, to understand the broader context of language stratification in the Indian subcontinent. The earliest significant development in this trajectory dates back to the early 7th century, when the Qur'an was translated into Persian by Salman Bin Farsi. This marked the first known instance of translating the Islamic holy text, sparking considerable debate over the possibility—and acceptability—of rendering the divine word into any language other than Arabic (Hashimi and Ahmad 2021). While Classical Arabic retained its religious authority, this translation marked an early shift in the perceived linguistic supremacy of Arabic, allowing Persian to assume a complementary, though not equivalent, role in religious discourse. Although Quranic Arabic differs significantly from modern standard Arabic (MSA) (Holes 2004), the event represented what some scholars consider an early instance of power-sharing between Arabic and Persian (Yücesoy 2015).

Moving forward to the era of Muslim rule in the Indian subcontinent, which lasted for nearly a thousand years, Persian emerged as the dominant language of administration and high culture, while Arabic maintained its stature as the religious language. This division of linguistic labor remained stable until the rise of the Mughal Empire, particularly during the reign of Emperor Akbar (1556–1605), a period often celebrated as a golden era in the subcontinent's history. Owing to Akbar's Persian lineage and the court's cultural orientation, Persian was firmly established as the lingua franca and the court language (Genç 2024). Simultaneously, vernacular languages such as Hindi and Sanskrit remained in use among the broader population (Truschke 2012). Eventually, British colonial rule (1858–1947) replaced Muslim governance, altering the linguistic landscape yet again by introducing English as a powerful new player in the region's sociolinguistic hierarchy (Peers 2006). This period lasted until 1947, when British India was partitioned into two independent states, India and Pakistan—an event that not only redefined political boundaries but also set the stage for distinct national language ideologies in each newly formed country.

The arrival and eventual consolidation of British power in the Indian subcontinent, particularly following the Indian Rebellion (known to Indian Muslims as the War of Independence) of 1857—a widespread but ultimately unsuccessful uprising against the British East India Company—marked a significant shift in the sociopolitical and linguistic landscape. Although the British had long exercised control through the East India Company, the rebellion prompted the British Crown to take

direct administrative control in 1858. From that point onward, English education played an instrumental role in shaping the ideological fabric of Indian society and its political dynamics. Unlike their approach in Africa, the British viewed India as a vast and administratively complex territory where English language proficiency was crucial for maintaining colonial control (Brutt-Griffler 2002). As part of their broader strategy, the British sought to create a class of 'Anglicised Indians' who would act as cultural intermediaries and promote British ideals (Evans 2002). However, English was not merely a neutral tool of administration—it became deeply entangled with issues of culture, religion and identity. Among both Hindus and Muslims, English was often perceived as a threat to Indigenous traditions and belief systems. While some Muslim leaders, notably Syed Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), welcomed English education as a means to negotiate power within the colonial framework, many religious scholars and community leaders rejected it, viewing the English language as a vehicle for ideological colonisation and a direct challenge to Islam (Hasan 1993).

This ideological tension was further complicated by inter-religious dynamics between Hindus and Muslims in colonial India. Although the Muslim population comprised roughly 25% of the total population (Pandey 1999), Muslims often felt politically and culturally marginalised under British rule. As linguistic identities became increasingly politicised, Urdu emerged as a key marker of Muslim identity in the region, while Hindi became similarly associated with Hindu nationalism. This polarisation intensified during the anti-colonial struggle, as both Hindi and Urdu were strategically employed to mobilise communities along religious lines (Rahman 2010). Despite the fact that many Muslims also spoke and engaged with Hindi, Urdu came to symbolise the Muslim aspiration for cultural and political autonomy. The growing fear among Muslims that a post-colonial, Hindu-majority India would sideline their interests contributed to a broader ideological movement advocating for a separate nation, giving birth to present-day Pakistan. In the context of the creation of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan on 14 August 1947, Urdu was elevated as a linguistic legacy of Muslim identity and a rallying symbol in the pursuit of self-determination.

The tension between national language policy and linguistic demographics became especially pronounced in the early years of Pakistan's independence, most notably in relation to Bengali. Although Urdu was declared the national language of Pakistan, the majority of the population at the time were Bengali speakers residing in East Pakistan. The imposition of Urdu as the sole national language led to widespread resentment and protest in East Pakistan, culminating in the historic Language Movement of 1952 (Alam 1991). The movement, which was a direct response to the state's refusal to recognise Bengali as a co-national language, revealed how language policy could function as a tool of ideological dominance and marginalisation (Islam 1978; Rahman 1996). Literature discussing the hierarchisation of language, most specifically Urdu's use as an instrument of national (dis)integration, highlights how linguistic nationalism contributed significantly to the eventual secession of East Pakistan (Ashraf 2023; Jalal 1990). The preference for Urdu over Bengali, despite Bengali representing the majority population, reflected a broader politics of language in which cultural hegemony was enforced through hierarchisation. The Bengali language conflict

is thus a pivotal example of how top-down language planning, when misaligned with linguistic realities on the ground, can intensify social fragmentation and nationalist movements.

Seen through an ethic-onto-epistemological lens, the historical layering of Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Bengali reflects linguistic, political and material reconfigurations of being and belonging, where language, identity and power intra-act³ (Barad 2007) to shape new subjectivities. This history provides the conditions under which English, sustained through British colonial legacies, emerged as a vital language in Pakistan, symbolising access to power, prestige and socioeconomic mobility (Haque 1993; Mahboob 2003, 2021; Shamim 2007). The ruling elite of both colonial and post-colonial South Asia were typically educated in European institutions and viewed English as essential for development, diplomacy and governance. Following the creation of Pakistan in 1947 and the separation of present-day Bangladesh in 1971, English was retained as the official language, while Urdu was declared the national language, each serving distinct ideological and functional roles. Today, English continues to operate as the *de facto* language of power, dominating in governance, law and higher education, while Urdu, though symbolically important as a sign of national identity and unity, holds a secondary position in institutional hierarchies (Rahman 2022). Meanwhile, Pakistan's many regional and Indigenous languages remain marginalised in national discourse. Both English and Urdu serve to build social capital for those who master them, reinforcing structures of privilege while excluding speakers of other languages (Ashraf 2023; Mansoor 2005). In this context, the politics of language remain deeply tied to postcolonial identity, statecraft and educational access.

These national language hierarchies do not remain confined to policy documents or public discourse; they are enacted, negotiated and institutionalised within educational spaces. Among these, Madaris constitute a particularly concentrated site where colonial legacies (English), state language projects (Urdu) and religious authority (Arabic) converge in visible and contested ways. Examining Madaris, therefore, allows us to observe how broader sociopolitical language stratifications crystallise in curriculum, pedagogy and everyday institutional practice.

3 | Language Hierarchisation in Madrasa in Pakistan

Building on the historical stratification of the languages outlined above, we now shift to an institutional site where these ideologies become especially visible and contested: Pakistani Madaris. Unlike many other educational institutions, Madaris explicitly position language as a theological, moral and epistemic concern, making hierarchisation legible through curriculum, pedagogy and everyday institutional discourse.

The institution of Madrasa has been central to Islamic education since at least the 11th century, both globally and within the Indian subcontinent, serving communities who view religious education as fundamentally distinct from, and often incompatible with, the goals of secular schooling (Anzar 2003). Throughout centuries of political transformation—including the rise and fall of empires, British colonial rule, the partition

of India, and the eventual creation of Pakistan and Bangladesh in 1947—Madaris have not only endured but have been both shaped by and responsive to these historical shifts. These changes have continually reconfigured the linguistic hierarchies within society and education, with Madaris reflecting, resisting and sometimes reinforcing the dominant language ideologies of their time (Rahman 1998). Amidst these historical transformations, Arabic has consistently retained its dominant symbolic and functional status within Madaris, as the sacred language of the Qur'an and the Islamic scholarly tradition, thus continuing to occupy the highest position in the linguistic hierarchy of these institutions (Hanif et al. 2021). The valorisation of Arabic in Madaris exemplifies how knowing, being, and doing remain inseparable: learning in Arabic enacts religious identity and ethical positioning simultaneously.

For some, the Madrasa represents a solution and an alternative to the modern ailments of the human mind, offering a better epistemological approach than secular schools (Aprison 2017). In many regions, such as the former Soviet Union, the secularisation of Madrasa was a state project aimed at controlling and transforming the religious mindset into a secular one (Khalilova and Babadjanov 2017). Despite such pressures, Madaris around the world have also demonstrated adaptability, including the adoption of multilingual approaches to religious education (Owodally 2011). In some cases, English has even been incorporated into the curriculum (Bakhri 2015), though its role and reception vary by context. In Pakistani Madaris, Arabic, due to its religious significance, is closely linked with the transmission of religious education based on the belief that any other language is unsuitable for this purpose (Hanif et al. 2021). Urdu, along with regional languages such as Punjabi, Pashto and Sindhi, is often employed as a pedagogical and communicative bridge to facilitate understanding among non-Arabic-speaking students. Meanwhile, English—despite its global prestige and widespread use outside the Madrasa—is often positioned as pedagogically peripheral and ideologically misaligned with religious instruction (Malik 2006).

At the same time, national prestige hierarchies do not remain external to Madaris. English retains considerable socioeconomic value within Pakistan, shaping student aspirations, parental expectations, and, in some cases, institutional negotiations. Even in contexts where it is framed as ideologically suspect, its association with mobility and opportunity creates subtle forms of pressure and engagement. In this sense, English both contrasts with and partially infiltrates the Madrasa system, producing tensions between religious epistemic commitments and pragmatic encounters with broader educational and economic structures. From an ethic-onto-epistemological perspective, this ambivalent positioning of the English language functions as an entangled practice in which discourses of morality, modernity and resistance materialise through language choice. This layered interplay of languages creates a distinct and often contradictory linguistic environment: English dominates Pakistan's broader social and institutional hierarchies, yet within Madaris it occupies a marginal and ideologically suspect position. As such, the Madrasa represents an alternative linguistic hierarchy, one that challenges mainstream valuations of language and reflects deeper ideological divisions within Pakistani society.

Madrasa education follows its own historical trajectory regarding language pedagogy and ideology. Within the diverse linguistic landscape of Madaris, languages such as Arabic, Persian and Urdu coexist alongside regional languages like Sindhi and Pashto (Rahman 1998), while English has only recently begun to appear in limited ways. These languages are not neutral tools of communication; instead, they play a crucial role in shaping religious knowledge and sectarian interpretations of Islam (Rahman 1998). For instance, in a typical Madrasa classroom, a teacher reads a classical Arabic text aloud, provides interpretive commentary in Urdu, and asks students to memorise selected passages in Arabic for recitation-based assessment. Arabic functions as the authoritative language of sacred knowledge, Urdu facilitates comprehension and explanation, and student competence is evaluated through accurate engagement with canonical texts. English may appear in separate subjects focused on general education, where it is positioned as a practical skill connected to broader social and economic participation. Through everyday practices such as text selection, language of instruction and assessment formats, linguistic hierarchies become materially enacted and normalised within the classroom.

The continued reliance on classical religious texts within the Madrasa has often been described as ‘frozen in time’ (Nayyar 1998), pointing to the preservation of epistemological traditions that resist certain forms of modernisation. Such textual continuity reinforces the authority of inherited interpretive frameworks and stabilises particular modes of knowledge transmission. In this sense, language functions as an ideological apparatus (Bourdieu 1991), structuring not only what is taught but also who is authorised to interpret, question or reproduce religious knowledge. These dynamics can contribute to the construction of in-group and out-group boundaries, at times shaping the ideological positioning of non-Muslim communities within broader societal discourse.

At the same time, broader Pakistani educational policy favours dominant languages such as English and Urdu (Khan and Zaki 2022), reinforcing a separate hierarchy. Ahmad and Guijun (2022) argue that the medium of instruction (MoI) model, which privileges English, perpetuates linguistic ideologies that contribute to social inequality and the marginalisation of certain socioeconomic classes. To mitigate this, Manan et al. (2019) call for the establishment of an ideological space for multilingual education policies, which would challenge English’s overwhelming dominance and foster more inclusive language practices. Adding to these tensions, English, rooted in Pakistan’s colonial legacy, continues to dominate the country’s social, academic and cultural spheres, pushing local languages into the margins (Durrani 2012). As a result, educational systems become ideologically opposed: English leads the secular, mainstream system, while the Madrasa system remains largely resistant to it (Ashraf 2018). This dynamic creates a symbolic battleground where linguistic hierarchisation reflects deeper ideological contestations between modernity and tradition, secularism and religiosity, and power and resistance.

Extending this understanding of language as an ideological apparatus (Bourdieu 1991), we find it important to recognise that different languages do not merely convey information—they create distinct meanings and generate a myriad of

discourses that vary depending on the context in which they are used. Languages are not static; they evolve and adapt, and in doing so, they reflect the social, political and cultural realities in which they are embedded. These evolving discourses are shaped by intersecting factors such as politics, religion, socioeconomic status and gender, all of which influence how individuals and groups communicate and interpret meaning (Pentón Herrera and Bryan 2022). In the context of Pakistani Madaris, where language is intimately tied to religious authority and identity, these discursive formations take on particular ideological weight. The interplay between language and ideology is profound. As Leonardo and Allen (2008, 415) explain, ideologies can be seen ‘as the problem of social relations of domination made intelligible through discourse’, underscoring the idea that language is not neutral but actively constructs social meaning. The discourses that arise within specific sociopolitical and religious frameworks shape the language that is used, as well as how that language is understood, valued and hierarchised (McConnell-Ginet 2020). This further emphasises the importance of critical observation and analysis in understanding language ideologies—not as abstract constructs, but as powerful forces embedded in real-world interactions, educational practices and institutional structures.

Additionally, discourse that conveys contextual and implied information can itself be understood as a form of ideology. This view highlights that ideology is not merely a static set of beliefs or abstract principles, but a complex force that actively shapes communication and meaning-making (Coelho-Lima et al. 2021). Because communication is mediated by discourse, it is also subject to ideological influence—meaning that what is said, how it is said, and what is heard are all shaped by ideological filters. As Kashima et al. (2021) argue, ideologically filtered communication can reinforce and intensify existing belief systems, particularly when individuals operate within closed networks that limit exposure to dissenting views. This insight is especially relevant in the context of Pakistani Madaris, where the selective use—or exclusion—of languages like English is not a neutral pedagogical choice but a reflection of deeper ideological commitments and identity positions. In this sense, ideology plays a crucial role in moulding, directing, and at times manipulating language use and thoughts about languages. The ideological forces embedded in different languages are often expressed through their distinct discursive hierarchies—structures that determine how knowledge is constructed, who is authorised to speak, and what kinds of meaning are considered legitimate (McConnell-Ginet 2020). These hierarchies enable languages (and their speakers) to assume divergent roles across social domains, ultimately shaping the ways individuals and communities perceive and engage with the world through education. In Pakistani Madaris, these dynamics are particularly salient, as language functions simultaneously as a vehicle of religious continuity, a marker of cultural resistance, and a site of ideological contestation.

The renowned scholar Gramsci asserted, ‘Every relationship of hegemony is necessarily an educational relationship’ (Gramsci and Boothman 1995, 157). In this light, it is essential to understand how language hierarchisation within Madrasa education contrasts with the sociolinguistic hierarchies of the surrounding society. Examining this relationship is crucial for understanding the ideological frameworks that

underlie and perpetuate language stratification. Education, as Althusser (2001) posits, functions as an ideological state apparatus—an institution through which dominant ideologies are reproduced not through coercion, but through normalised, everyday practices. Within this system, teachers and students may unconsciously uphold prevailing ideologies, as educational methods shaped by state curricula and standardised assessments subtly reinforce a particular worldview, all while maintaining the illusion of individual agency and choice. In this way, language hierarchies are preserved and naturalised through formal education, including in contexts like the Madrasa. As Pentón Herrera (2022) reminds us, language is not innocent—it carries the weight of historical ideologies and, when institutionalised through education, becomes a tool for reinforcing desired social orders. These practices demonstrate how language, through its institutionalisation in education, can become complicit in broader systems of oppression, reinforcing hegemonic structures under the guise of neutrality and progress.

Yet, the key functions of ideology in education, particularly its role in shaping language hierarchies, are often overlooked, especially in contexts across the Global South like Pakistan. Critical theory contends that uncovering and challenging ideology requires subversion and the cultivation of critical awareness—what Brookfield (2001) terms *ideological critique*. Ideological critique urges educators and learners to examine how language is mobilised within educational systems to legitimise certain knowledges while marginalising others. As Williams (1977) reminds us, structural ideologies shape social institutions as well as our everyday perceptions, practices and sense of self. In educational spaces, these ideologies manifest through hierarchies of language, where some languages are exalted as vehicles of knowledge and power (e.g., Arabic in the Madrasa, and English outside the Madrasa), while others are relegated to the periphery (e.g., English in the Madrasa and Indigenous languages outside of Madrasa). Through ideological critique, individuals can begin to interrogate these hierarchies, resist their normalising influence and reimagine educational models that are more equitable, inclusive and culturally sustaining (Becker 2022; Brookfield 2001). As Marcuse (1968, 72) explains, ‘Critical theory is, foremost, self-critical and reflective about the societal forces that make up its own basis’. In this sense, the aim of ideological critique is not merely to expose the workings of hegemony within education, but to foster the intellectual and emotional conditions necessary for meaningful resistance, transformation and the decolonisation of knowledge, particularly in historically marginalised educational contexts.

Before turning to the political dimensions of language hierarchisation, it is important to distinguish between what happens within Madrasa classrooms and how these dynamics circulate beyond them. Within Madaris, language hierarchies are enacted through curriculum, instruction and assessment, which shape how knowledge and authority are organised. Outside the classroom, however, these hierarchies take on additional meanings as they are mobilised in public discourse, media and political debates. In the following section, we shift our focus from these internal pedagogical practices to their broader ideological and political articulations.

4 | The Political Use of Language Hierarchisation in Pakistan

Institutional language hierarchies do not remain confined to classroom practice. As they circulate through public discourse, media ecologies and political arenas, they acquire new intensities and consequences. The symbolic power of language, as Bourdieu (1991) argues, lies not only in communication but in its capacity to regulate social access to knowledge, prestige and authority. As discussed by Becker (2023), language is not just a medium—it is a mode of social classification and control. Further, as Bryan and Pentón Herrera (2024, 1) note, ‘language is present in every single part of our lives. From thoughts to street signs, and spoken or written messages, language is the vehicle our brain uses to understand its surroundings and make sense of the world’. In a context like Pakistan, where education, religion and nationalism intersect in volatile ways, language becomes deeply politicised. That is, in Pakistan, language hierarchisation extends beyond educational or religious domains; it becomes (and has been throughout history) a political weapon. The emotional and ideological attachments to languages like Arabic and Urdu are not neutral—they are mobilised strategically to reinforce ideological hierarchies and to marginalise dissenting voices or groups whose language practices fall outside the sanctioned norm.

The weaponisation of language (Pascale 2019; Pentón Herrera and Bryan 2022) is evident in how religious sensitivities around Arabic are manipulated to suppress critique and provoke fear. A recent and highly publicised case in Pakistan involved a woman accused of blasphemy for wearing clothing adorned with Arabic script, mistaken for Qur’anic verses, who narrowly escaped lynching thanks to the intervention of a female police officer (Chaudhry 2024). Such incidents illustrate the precarious position of linguistic semiotics in the public sphere. The incident demonstrates how discourse, affect and material bodies interact, where the script on fabric fuses with social fear and ethical judgement—an enactment of ethic-onto-epistemology rather than a detached linguistic debate (Barad 2007). When language becomes imbued with sacredness, its visibility—even in fashion—can ignite violence. The ideological weight of Arabic, cultivated over centuries of religious education and reinforced by Madrasa discourse, elevates its status to near-idolatry. Madaris, in this sense, are both custodians of sacred knowledge and key agents in promoting the affective sanctification of language through education. Through sermons, classroom instruction and scholarly commentary, religious actors trained within these institutions participate in shaping public understandings of sacred language, sometimes reinforcing moral boundaries and at other times intervening to call for clarification or restraint. In this way, Madaris are embedded within a broader political and media ecology rather than operating outside it.

As Hassan (2018) demonstrates in her critical discourse analysis of Pakistani news headlines, media framing plays a central role in constructing ideological positions and shaping public perception through selective lexical choices, emphasis and repetition. In a digitally mediated environment, such framing does not merely amplify existing tensions but actively reconfigures how authority is recognised and contested. Sermons, statements and interpretive claims associated with Madrasa-trained scholars

circulate alongside media headlines, commentary threads and viral narratives, creating new sites of legitimacy and dispute. Authority, therefore, is no longer confined to institutional space; it is negotiated through visibility, circulation and audience reception within digital discourse. This reshaping of authority complicates traditional hierarchies, as religious legitimacy becomes entangled with media logics of speed, affect and spectacle.

While Arabic is widely revered, English, despite its global power, is often portrayed as a secular, even imperial, threat to Islamic values not only in Pakistan but in the rest of the Islamic world (Mohd-Asraf 2005). This dichotomy reveals the ideological entanglement of language with broader discourses of morality, modernity and national identity. Madrasa discourse operates within this tension: it is simultaneously counter-hegemonic (i.e., resisting state and global pressures) and hegemonic (i.e., perpetuating internal hierarchies based on access to sacred language). The dual role of Madrasa discourse complicates any simplistic interpretation of Madaris as solely conservative or resistant. This duality underscores that ideology emerges through everyday intra-actions of teachers, students and sacred texts, affirming the inseparability of epistemology, ontology and ethics. Madaris, therefore, emerge as complex ideological and educational actors who both challenge and reinforce language-based exclusions. As Pentón Herrera (2022, 59) puts it, 'language is deeply connected to who we are as human beings and is tied to our identities, emotions and culture'. As a language becomes imbued with sacred and emotional significance (as seen in the example by Chaudhry 2024, above), it may function simultaneously as a source of spiritual intimacy and a mechanism for regulating belief and behaviour in societies.

Furthermore, the rise of social media has expanded the scope of language weaponisation. Online platforms now serve as rapid vehicles for disseminating ideological narratives, often without nuance or accountability. Blasphemy accusations, historically rooted in Pakistan's Penal Code (e.g., Section 295-A) (Pakistan Penal Code 1860), are increasingly linked to linguistic displays and misinterpretations. In these cases, language becomes more than a marker of belonging—it becomes a liability. The sentimentality surrounding religious texts, amplified by digital virality, often overwhelms rational counter-narratives. This emotionality is strategically exploited by ideological actors to mobilise outrage, enforce conformity and suppress dissent. Religious scholars and institutions associated with Madaris frequently respond to such controversies through public statements, sermons and mediated engagements, thereby participating in the circulation and negotiation of sacred authority in digital spaces. Madaris are thus both shaped by and contributors to these evolving dynamics, occupying a position within an ongoing process of ideological contestation rather than remaining static preservers of tradition. They should, therefore, be understood not as singular drivers of politicised outrage, but as institutional actors operating within a broader constellation of media platforms, political movements, state policies and public affect.

In moving toward more equitable educational futures, it is crucial to reflect on the potential of teacher education, ideological awareness and mutual dialogue as sites of intervention. Rather than treating Madrasa and secular institutions as

mutually exclusive, we position them as interlocutors within a more pluralistic educational landscape. Encouraging critical language awareness among educators—both within and beyond Madaris—can help unravel the naturalised hierarchies that currently shape the sociolinguistic order. Ideological critique, grounded in pedagogical practice, must engage with the affective and spiritual dimensions of language without instrumentalising them. If language is to be a site of peace and liberation rather than conflict and domination, then educators within Madaris must be equipped to navigate its symbolic power responsibly. This requires a shift from monologic to dialogic models of education, where different epistemologies, languages and ideologies are not erased but engaged with critically and ethically. Though we recognise this is easier said than done, it is precisely in the discomfort of dialogue, the tensions of negotiation and the willingness to sit with contradiction that more just and inclusive educational possibilities can begin to emerge. This is what Freire (2005) envisioned as education's potential to become a practice of freedom and a pathway toward a more humane world.

5 | Final Thoughts

Throughout this manuscript, we have examined how language hierarchies in Pakistani Madaris shape and are shaped by broader questions of education, religion and identity. Rather than treating these hierarchies as fixed, the analysis highlights how they are enacted through everyday pedagogical practices and can be critically engaged. This has important implications for teacher education, particularly for supporting educators in engaging with the ideological dimensions of language use. Research suggests that educators are often underprepared in this regard (Hussain 2018), making professional dialogue and development key sites for reflection (Hussain and Pentón Herrera 2024). In practice, this involves examining how languages are positioned in classroom interaction, curriculum and assessment. Moving forward, we encourage the academic community to create opportunities for dialogue between Madrasa and secular educational spaces around language, curriculum and pedagogy. Such engagement does not require consensus, but it does require a willingness to engage with difference. In contexts like Pakistan, where linguistic, religious and political histories are deeply intertwined, this work can be complex, but it is also necessary.

Author Contributions

Luis Javier Pentón Herrera: conceptualization, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing, project administration. **Yasir Hussain:** conceptualization, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing, project administration.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Endnotes

- ¹ Throughout this paper, we use the word 'Madrasa' as a unit for the institution. As such, we understand Madrasa as both an institution and a singular school, with Madaris representing the plural form.
- ² In this article, we understand intra-action as 'the mutual constitution of entangled agencies', which, unlike interaction, assumes that entities do not preexist their relations but instead 'emerge through their intra-action' (Barad 2007, 33).
- ³ We use intra-act as a verb form of Barad's (2007, 33) concept of intra-action, which describes 'the mutual constitution of entangled agencies'. To intra-act, unlike interact, emphasizes that entities do not preexist their relations but emerge through them.

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