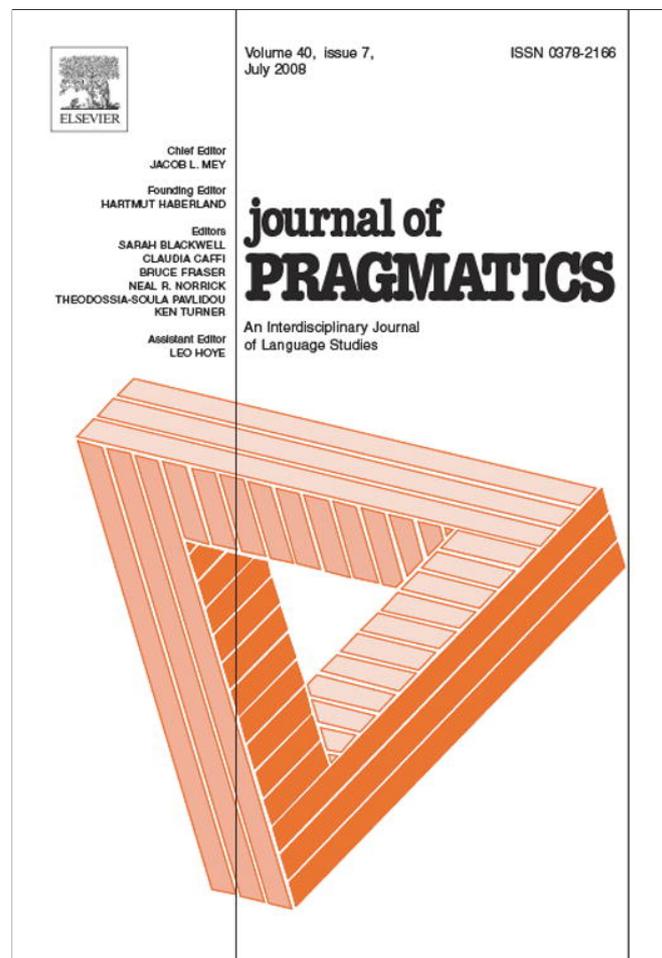


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Scripting a new identity: The battle for Devanagari in nineteenth century India

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Abstract

This study investigates the discursive construction of Hindu identity in the late nineteenth century in North India. Analyzing historical data from a language ideological debate, I show that the construction of the Hindi language and script as perfect and the Urdu language and script as defective were part of the construction of Hindu identity. The metalinguistic debate on Hindi and Urdu often transgressed from linguistic into sociocultural realms by establishing links between language, ethics, morality, and authenticity. The Urdu language and script were argued to be foreign, fraudulent, and prejudiced, in contrast to the Hindi language and script, which were projected as indigenous, honest, and impartial. Drawing on a language ideological theoretical framework (Irvine and Gal, 2000), I show the actual workings of the semiotic processes of *iconization*, *fractal recursivity*, and *erasure* in this language debate. I also demonstrate that a major outcome of this debate was that Hindi and Urdu began to index Hindu and Muslim identity, respectively.

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Keywords: Language ideology; Iconization; Fractal recursivity; Erasure; Hindu identity; Indexicality; Urdu; Hindi

1. Introduction

This paper examines the construction of Hindu identity in the late nineteenth century in North India. I investigate the contrasting metalinguistic discourses on Hindi and Urdu that formed part of the debates on the suitability of Hindi (and by implication the unsuitability of Urdu) as the language of courts of law. Blommaert (1999) calls such debates ‘language ideological debates’, where the structure and use of language constitute the central axis of discussion and dispute. As language ideological debates are produced and reproduced in the

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backdrop of sociopolitical conditions that involve struggles for power and social identities, I argue that the representation of Hindi as perfect and Urdu as defective entailed a process of differentiation, which contributed to the construction of Hindu identity.

The construction of Devanagari and Hindi as impeccable linguistic systems began in the second half of the nineteenth century and continued well into the twentieth century. The main venue for the production and dissemination of such an immaculate conception of Hindi was the Hindi movement of the nineteenth century, which focused on the demand for the recognition of Hindi as the official language of courts of law (King, 1994). The movement started in response to Act 29 of 1837 by which the British colonial government replaced Persian with Urdu/Hindustani as the official language of the courts of law in the North West Provinces and parts of the Central Provinces of India.¹ Persian had been the official language of India for more than six centuries, since the establishment of the Muslim Slave dynasty in the early thirteenth century.

Act 29 of 1837 sparked off a series of petitions and memoranda from Hindus to the British government, demanding the introduction of Hindi in the Devanagari script in place of Urdu written in the Persian script. The main argument was that the Persian script (and by implication the Urdu language) was defective in that anything written in it was susceptible to multiple readings, thus encouraging fraud and forgery. Hindu nationalists argued that the Devanagari script, by contrast, was perfect in all respects; it was a script, they asserted, that lent a word written in it to one and only one reading, thus avoiding any possible fraud. I refer to this socioculturally informed conception of Hindi and Urdu by Hindu nationalists as Hindi language ideology. Although various aspects of the Urdu language and its speakers were targeted in the debate, in this paper, I focus only on the issue of script, because it was socially and politically very salient and a focal point of both public and intellectual debates of the nineteenth century.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 gives background information on Hindi and Urdu and their scripts. Section 3 provides a brief overview of the existing work and an outline of the theoretical framework for this study. Section 4 introduces the empirical data. Section 5 provides the sociopolitical context of the Hindi language ideology. Section 6 presents an analysis of the data. Section 7 starts with a discussion on the outcome of the debate in terms of the reallocation of the indexical value of Urdu and Hindi and ends with a summary and conclusion.

2. Background on Hindi and Urdu

Hindi is mainly spoken in India and is the official language of the country.² Urdu is spoken both in India and Pakistan. Both Hindi and Urdu belong to the Indo-Aryan sub-branch of the Indo-European language family. Linguists believe that Hindi and Urdu along with other new Indo-Aryan languages such as Bengali, Marathi, and Punjabi emerged from the middle Indo-Aryan phase by about 1000 AD.³ Khari Boli, a dialect spoken in and around Delhi constitutes the dialectal base of both Hindi and Urdu and provides their common grammatical structure.

¹ The British used Hindustani to refer to the Urdu language. Earlier names of Urdu also include Hindi, Hindavi, *Rekhta*, etc. See Faruqi (2001) for a detailed account of the various names that have been used for Urdu at different points in time.

² According to the 1991 census of India, the numbers of speakers of Hindi and Urdu are 337,272,114 and 43,406,932 respectively, which is about 40% and 5% of the total population excluding the state of Jammu and Kashmir because the census could not be held in that state due to political instability. It is important to note, however, that in the Indian census, Hindi is used as a cover term for 48 language varieties (Mallikarjun, 2001). The figure for the Hindi speakers will drop significantly if the number of speakers of other language varieties are deducted from the total.

³ See Masica (1991) for the origin and development of modern Indo-Aryan languages.

Hindi and Urdu, however, orient to different sources for the coinage of technical words—Hindi draws exclusively upon Sanskrit, whereas Urdu depends on Persian and Arabic in addition to English and native sources.

Urdu has borrowed the phonemes /f/, /z/, /ʒ/, /χ/, /β/, and /q/ from Arabic and Persian.⁴ It has also borrowed several morphological affixes such as /-mānd/, ‘having a quality’, as in /*lhunərmānd*/ ‘possessing skill’, and /*ba-*/ ‘with’ as in /*babərəkət*/ ‘with blessings’, ‘blessed’.⁵ Urdu has also borrowed a large number of lexical items from Arabic and Persian, and therefore even in spoken registers, while many words and sentences could be similar in Urdu and Hindi, many are different (Russell, 1996).⁶ Urdu has also borrowed some literary genres from Persian, for example *ghazal*, a form of love poetry consisting of a rhyme and refrain.

Hindi is written in the Devanagari script—the script used to write Sanskrit, the sacred language of Hindus. Devanagari is widely used in North India; in addition to Hindi, it is used to write other modern Indic languages such as Nepali, Marathi, and Bhojpuri. Devanagari is an example of an abugida writing system—a type of writing system which consists of symbols for both consonants and vowels.⁷ But, unlike an alphabet system, for example English, where all vowels are marked, abugida does not represent one particular vowel—the most common vowel. In Sanskrit that vowel is schwa. So, in Hindi-Devanagari also, schwa is not written except word-initially. In all other places consonant graphemes are believed to have an inherent schwa in them. Despite the fact that the phonological structure of Hindi is different from that of Sanskrit, Devanagari is still a good script for modern Indic languages such as Hindi.⁸

Urdu employs a modified version of the Persian script, which itself is an adapted form of the Arabic script. The modifications involved creating graphemes for the native Indic phonemes such as voiceless aspirated and breathy stops, e.g. /p^h/, /t^h/, /k^h/, /b^h/, /d^h/, /g^h/, etc. An important characteristic of the Persian script, and in fact the original Arabic script and all its derivatives, is that short vowels are often not written, although diacritics for them do exist. In Urdu these diacritics are called *zabar*, *zer*, and *pesh*, which represent schwa /ə/, high front lax vowel /ɪ/, and high back lax vowel /ʊ/, respectively. Although the optional nature of short vowels makes writing in Urdu fast, it does create the potential for some ambiguity. For example, the Urdu word <پل> consists only of the consonant graphemes <p> and <l>; the short vowel has not been marked, which means that it can be pronounced with a *zabar*, a schwa, as in [pəl], ‘moment’, like the English word ‘dull’, or with a *zer*, a high front vowel, as in /pɪl/, ‘to labor’, like the English word ‘hill’, or with a *pesh*, high back vowel, as in /pʊl/, ‘bridge’, like the English word ‘pull’.

Another characteristic of the Persian script is that many graphemes have the same basic shape and are differentiated either by the number of dots or their position above or below a grapheme. For example, the graphemes <ب> and <p> <پ> share the same basic shape but are differentiated by the number of dots; the grapheme has one dot, whereas <p> has three dots underneath. Although in print, these graphemes are not confusing, in non-careful hand-writing, dots may not always be placed at the right place, which may create some confusion.

This paper will not go into the technical advantages or disadvantages of the Devanagari and the Urdu scripts, because no script is perfect in terms of representing speech in writing.

⁴ The phoneme /ʒ/ however occurs only in a few literary words.

⁵ Symbols between slashes indicate phonemes, or morphemes; symbols between <> indicate graphemes or letters.

⁶ Russell (1996) argues against the deep-seated view among sociolinguists in India that Urdu and Hindi are dialects of the same language written in different scripts. See also Ahmad (1997) for an empirical study of the mutual intelligibility of Urdu and Hindi.

⁷ Amharic and other Ethiopic languages also use the abugida writing system.

⁸ See Robert D. King (2001) for a discussion of Devanagari and the issue of digraphia between Hindi and Urdu.

Furthermore, a discussion of script in an essentialized fashion is not very helpful, because it is not difficult to find defects in any script. In India itself, protagonists of the Dalit movement, led by lower caste Hindus, in their diatribe against Brahmins and the Sanskrit language point out a large number of defects in the Devanagari script (Ahmad and Samant, 2006). So, what this paper shows instead is how certain features of the Urdu script were exploited by Hindu nationalists for the purpose of creating linguistic and social distinctions, which went into the construction of Hindu identity. In other words, I show the ways in which Hindu nationalists essentialized the Urdu script by focusing on the technical features of the script in a contextual vacuum and completely ignored how it actually works in real life.

It is, however, worth mentioning that the potential ambiguity of the Urdu script discussed above could happen only if words occur in isolation—stripped of all linguistic and discourse contexts. Furthermore, Urdu speakers and writers mark short vowels in places where contexts are not easily available or the omission is likely to lead to confusion. For example, if the word <پل> were to occur in an elementary school book, the appropriate vowel would be supplied; if the intended meaning was ‘bridge’ a *pesh*, a diacritic for the high back vowel would be placed above the consonant grapheme <p> پ.

3. Theoretical framework

There are two bodies of research on Hindi and Urdu that are relevant for this study—studies by historians and political scientists and those by sociolinguists. The first body of research examines the role of Hindi and Urdu in the construction of Hindu and Muslim nationalisms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g. Dasgupta, 1970; Brass, 1974; Robinson, 1974; Van der Veer, 1994; Dalmia, 1997; Zavos, 2000). In these studies, language is treated as a symbol of political allegiance. As these studies focus on the macro-social structures such as nationalism, language in these studies is considered to be an auxiliary factor in the rise of religion-based nationalisms.

The second body of research consists of studies carried out by sociolinguists (e.g. King, 1994; Hasnain and Rajyashree, 2004; Agnihotri, 2007). Sociolinguistic studies on Urdu and Hindi are theoretically positioned within the sociology of language approach. Although these studies help understand the symbolic role of language in the expression of macro-social identities such as nationalism, they say little about how people employ language and discourse as a resource to construct and display social identities. The formation and expression of ethnic or religious identity are *not* confined to macro-social categories such as nationalism; ethnicity is a social resource that people use at other more concrete levels of social organization. Fenton (1999) argues, “We can observe ethnicity in macro-social formations, in the intermediate meso-structures of social institutions, and in the face-to-face exchanges of micro-social life” (p. 13). In fact, sociolinguists argue that there is a dialectical relationship between the micro and the macro; the macro social structures are constituted through practices at micro social levels. And social and linguistic practices at the micro level are informed and influenced by macro-social forces.

Recent approaches to language and identity view discourse as acts through which people make sense of the world around them; speakers are seen as active agents who participate in the construction of social realities. This approach known in the literature as a social constructionism has assumed a central position in recent work in sociolinguistics. Discourse in this perspective is treated as a form of social practice, which constitutes social realities including social relations (e.g. Fairclough, 1992; Van Dijk, 1997; Bucholtz and Hall, 2005).

This study is theoretically anchored in a language ideology framework. Language debates are rich sites for the study of the role of language in the construction of social identities, because they often constitute an explicit articulation of language, its structure, its use, and more importantly, its social and cultural values. They are also rooted in the broader sociopolitical conditions and are often constructed by people in response to certain sociolinguistic situations. Moreover, the formulation and articulation of language ideologies can also be seen as a form of practice which shapes and is shaped by broader developments in society. Blommaert (1999) argues, ‘Power (including the (re)production of ideology) must be identified as a form of practice, historically contingent and socially embedded’ (p. 7). A language ideology framework therefore is able to demonstrate how larger sociopolitical structures are enacted through (meta)linguistic discourse.

3.1. Language ideology

Language ideology refers to common-sense ideas that speakers have about the structure and use of their language. Silverstein defines it as “sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (1979:193). Language ideology is seen as a nexus between linguistic forms and social structure. Woolard and Schieffelin (1994) emphasize this relationship by noting that, “ideologies of language are significant for social as well as linguistic analyses because they are not only about language. Rather, such ideologies envision and enact links of language to group and personal identity, to aesthetics, to morality, and to epistemology” (p. 55–56).

Several studies (e.g. Silverstein, 1985; Kulick, 1998; Kroskrity, 2000; Irvine and Gal, 2000) show that language ideology is a useful framework for understanding language change, language differentiation, and language maintenance and shift. I draw upon Irvine and Gal (2000) as a theoretical model for this study. Their model focuses on the process of linguistic differentiation and shows how people’s ideologies affect the perception and interpretation of linguistic differences, which are used to construct, enact, and imagine social identities.

According to Irvine and Gal’s model, language ideology works through three semiotic processes of *iconization*, *fractal recursivity* and *erasure*. These processes provide participants and observers with a framework for understanding and interpreting linguistic differences. Irvine and Gal define iconization as “a transformation of the sign relationship between linguistic features (or varieties) and the social images with which they are linked” (2000:37). They define fractal recursivity as “the projection of an opposition, salient at some level of relationship, onto some other level. For example, intra-group oppositions might be projected outward onto intergroup relations, or vice versa” (2000:38). Erasure is defined as “the process by which ideology, in simplifying the sociolinguistic field, renders some persons or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena) invisible” (2000:38). I return to these semiotic processes in greater detail in section 6 and provide some examples of them.

4. Data

This study is based on an analysis of two memoranda submitted to the British —one by Babu Shiva Prasad (1823–1895) (aka Raja Shiva Prasad), an inspector in the Education Department, in 1868 under the title ‘Court Characters in the Upper Provinces of India’ (henceforth CCUP). The second memorandum was submitted in 1897 by a group of prominent Hindus under the title ‘Court Characters and Primary Education in the N-W Provinces & Oudh’ (henceforth CCPE). As is clear from their titles, both documents focus on the issue of script. The CCUP was written by an

individual. It is fairly brief, seven pages in all. The CCPE however is the result of a collaborative project. It is a fairly large document consisting of 165 pages, which includes a 100-page appendix and rich footnotes. The appendix reproduces some of the old arguments that were presented in support of Hindi. For example, it refers to and quotes from Shiva Prasad's 1868 memorandum. It also reproduces relevant parts of testimonials of people such as Harishchandra before the Education Commission of 1882. Both memoranda were published in English. Copies of these documents were obtained from the British Library and the US Library of Congress.

In addition to these primary documents, I also examine some articles and reports published in the local language newspapers of the North West Provinces. Although the original newspapers have not survived, we have reports on them in English, prepared by civil servants for private circulation among administrative officials. They were published under the title 'Selections from the Vernacular News Papers' (henceforth SVNP).⁹ These reports were prepared for all the provinces of India; for this research, I study those of the NWP, Oudh, and the Central Provinces, where the battle for Devanagari was being fought. The SVNP contains reports on social and political issues that appeared in local newspapers, which the civil servants thought were crucial for the government.¹⁰ The document is very well organized; it gives a list of the newspapers that the officer studied in preparing the report. The list often contains the name of the publisher, the language of the newspaper, the place of publication, etc. It also mentions the dates of their publication and the dates when the newspapers were received. These reports are quite extensive in their coverage of social, political, economic, and cultural issues. Often they are classified in terms of subject matters such as education, law and order, politics, and foreign policy.

The CCPE does not attribute authorship; but, historians believe that it was compiled and published under the supervision of Madan Mohan Malviya (1861–1946), a prominent nationalist leader and a lawyer by profession (Dalmia, 1997:176). The main argument of the document is that the replacement of Persian with Urdu in 1837, as the language of courts of law, by the British was a grave mistake, because the language of the people of India had been Hindi since the Muslim invasion.¹¹ In addition to claiming the historical superiority of Hindi, the authors of CCPE also argued that Urdu written in the Persian script is not comprehensible to people, because of excessive use of Persian loanwords and due to inherent defects of the Persian script. They believed that if Urdu was replaced with Hindi in the Devanagari script, people would be able to understand court documents better. They further argued that the most important reason for the introduction of Devanagari is that it would lead to improvement in literacy and primary education and overall progress of the people in North India.

5. Sociopolitical contexts of Hindi language ideology

The second half of the nineteenth century was a volatile period in modern Indian history. It marks the beginning of a struggle for social and political assertions of the Indian people against the colonial state and also of various castes and religious groups against one another. An understanding of these developments is crucial to the grasp of the production of the Hindi language ideology. The main sociopolitical development which embeds the Hindi language

⁹ I accessed SVNP volumes at the National Archives of India, New Delhi.

¹⁰ I believe the officers themselves translated the reports from vernacular newspapers into English.

¹¹ The first Muslim invasion of the Indian subcontinent took place in 712 A.D. when Mohammad Bin Qasim invaded the North western part of the Indian subcontinent.

ideology and in which it is also simultaneously embedded is the beginning of the assertion of a unified Hindu community.

Hinduism in the pre-modern period was not a monolithic religion, but an aggregate of several religious beliefs and sects. A monolithic Hindu identity began to develop in the later part of the nineteenth century (e.g. Jones, 1976; Pandey, 1990; Chatterjee, 1993; Van der Veer, 1994; Dalmia, 1997; Zavos, 2000; Bhatt, 2001; Orsini, 2002). This section briefly outlines the processes that contributed to the consolidation of Hindu identity, which was articulated through particular conceptions of Hindi and Urdu in the language ideological debate under discussion here. The following section draws heavily on Zavos (2000).

Although several factors contributed to the unification of Hinduism, Zavos argues that the presence of a colonial state and its use of the discourse of ‘organization’ as a cultural force was the most important factor. Through the discourse of organization, Zavos argues, the colonial state presented itself as an embodiment of modernity, and the Indian society one of chaos and disorganization (p. 14). The colonial state used this as a rationale for the necessity of continuing their rule. In response to this challenge, he reasons, the Indian people began to create social structures and institutions that exhibited organization. The beginning of the unification of Hinduism, according to Zavos, was part of the broader phenomenon and can be seen as an attempt to counter the state’s hegemonic discourse of organization.

According to Zavos, attempts to unify Hinduism in the nineteenth century can be grouped under two main ideological themes—reformism and orthodoxy. Reformists were primarily working in response to the internal problems of the Hindu society, for example the caste system, which posed a challenge to the unification of Hinduism. Reformists argued that the caste system could be reformed by reinterpreting Hindu religious texts. In line with this, Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj, advocated a merit-based caste-system, in place of the traditional caste system which was based on birth. Zavos calls this approach a vertical restructuring of Hinduism. A example of this approach was also seen in efforts to ‘win back’ low caste Hindus who were ‘lost’ to Christianity because of the efforts of missionaries.¹² The orthodox position, by contrast, was informed by the belief that all castes have an important role to play in the Hindu society and therefore deserve respect.¹³ Proponents of the orthodox position did not see any need for internal reform in Hinduism. They instead focused on the external, horizontal unification of Hinduism. Both approaches went on independently of each other for some time until the reformists realized that it was impossible to reform the caste system to unify Hinduism. The focus then shifted to the horizontal unification of Hinduism. The cow protection movement, which raged through North India in the late nineteenth century, manifests attempts at the horizontal unification of Hindus.

Hindus began to see cow slaughter by Muslims as an act of aggression on the identity of Hinduism. They launched a series of attacks on Muslims in North India to prevent them from slaughtering cows on the occasion of the religious festival of *qurbani* in which cows, sheep, goats, etc. are sacrificed as a religious obligation.¹⁴ The cow thus emerged as an important symbol of the unification of Hinduism. Zavos argues that the movement provided a strong means for the horizontal unification of Hinduism (p. 82). A more significant shift from the vertical to

¹² The *Shuddhi* or ‘purification’ movement led by Arya Samajists aimed at bringing Christian and Muslim converts back to Hinduism.

¹³ Sanatan Dharma Sabhas represent a horizontal organization of Hinduism.

¹⁴ See Pandey (1990) for a detailed description of attacks on Muslim villages in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. He also points out that other pre-existing factors also fed into the cow protection movement.

horizontal unification of Hinduism was seen in the following years. There was an attempt to create a political constituency of Hinduism to represent Hindu interests. Political unification was seen to override social divisions of castes among Hindus. These attempts at constructing a unified Hindu identity provide the backdrop against which the Hindi language ideology can be properly understood. In other words, the metalinguistic debates on Hindi and Urdu were discursive acts toward constituting a distinct Hindu identity.

6. Analysis

In this section, I show the actual workings of the semiotic processes of iconization, fractal recursivity, and erasure through an analysis of the Hindi language ideology. The section is divided into subsections on the basis of various themes that form parts of the larger Hindi language ideology. In the debate, these themes were not always neatly isolated from one another. They often overlap; for example the discourse of foreignness of Urdu often intersects with that of morality. The division therefore does not imply any analytical separateness between them.

6.1. Foreign vs. indigenous

In the debate over script, the Urdu script, and by implication the Urdu language, is presented as foreign, having links in Semitic languages and cultures. The fact that Urdu is Indo-Aryan in its origin and that it occupies indigenous sociolinguistic space is completely denied. This is important because although there were some uncertainties among linguists about the origin of Brahui, a language spoken in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and its relationship with other languages, the origin of Urdu and Hindi and its mutual relationship were *not* in dispute. In the debate, Hindi, in contrast to Urdu, is valorized as the speech par excellence of the native Aryans and thus the only legitimate symbol of Hindu nationality. Shiva Prasad reacting to the British policy of making Urdu the official language, remarks:

I cannot see the wisdom of the policy which thrusts a *Semitic* element into the bosoms of Hindus and *alienates them from their Aryan speech*; not only speech, but all that is Aryan, because through speech ideas are formed, and through ideas the manners and customs. To read Persian is to become Persianized, all ideas become corrupt and *our nationality is lost*. Cursed be the day which saw the Muhammadans [Muslims] cross the Indus; all the *evils* which we find amongst us, we are indebted for to our “beloved brethren” the Muhammadans. (1868:5, emphasis mine)

Shiva Prasad's comments on the colonial language policy are loaded with specific understandings of the relationship between language and social identities. For him, the use of the Urdu language/script not only has social and moral consequences, but it can also impact people's thought processes. On the social level, he argues, the use of Urdu encroaches upon the Aryan identity of Hindus; one cannot remain a true Aryan and at the same time use the Urdu language and script. This is an echo of the eighteenth century European ideology in which language and race were argued to be coterminous.¹⁵ But, how does he apply the notion of foreignness on Urdu, given the undisputed linguistic fact that Urdu, like Hindi, is an Indo-Aryan language? In other words, how does the use of Urdu ‘thrust a Semitic element into the bosoms of the Hindus’? Shiva Prasad

¹⁵ See Irvine and Gal (2000) for a discussion of how this ideology influenced the colonial project of linguistic mapping in West Africa.

provides an interesting, though convoluted, explanation. He argues that Urdu written in the Persian script is ‘semi-Persian’, because of Persian loanwords, and that ‘the Persian of our day is half-Arabic’, because of Arabic loanwords, so Urdu is Semitic in its essence (CCPE, 1897, Appendix: 73).

Notice how Shiva Prasad selectively chooses to define Urdu in terms of its borrowed vocabulary which is quite small compared to the native Indic vocabulary, rather than the linguistic structure that Urdu shares with Hindi, which linguists believe to be the defining feature of a language. In terms of Irvine and Gal’s model this is an example of erasure; the shared linguistic history of Urdu and Hindi is being negated in order to construct Urdu as foreign. The use of Urdu, Shiva Prasad further argues, will lead to some moral degeneration in that people’s manners and customs will fall apart. For him, Hindi iconically stands for civility and moral uprightness, whereas the Urdu language and script will destroy Hindus’ manners, customs, and tradition. The moral dimension of the ideological debate is discussed further in section 6.2 below.

The process of ‘foreignization’ of Urdu was a pervasive theme of the nineteenth century language ideological debate. Lexicographers, who are particularly interested in tracing the etymological genealogy of words, could not be expected to sit on the fence. In fact, I argue that they shape (and are also shaped by) ideologies of ordinary users of language, who become conscious of which words are ‘native’ and which are *not* through their work. Mathura Prasada Misra, a nineteenth century lexicographer, in preface to his dictionary published in 1865 says:

Like a child in the hour of need, it (the Hindi) must naturally resort to its parent—the Sanskrit—for help. By Sanskrit it must be fed and nourished. It needs no foreign aid. Yet we sometimes see foreign aid *forced* upon it. Arabic, Persian, and Urdu words and phrases are arrayed by its side in battalions to support ... But its officious and unwelcome supporters forget that a nation which relies on mercenaries only walks on a quicksand, or leans on a broken staff. (CCPE, 1897, Appendix: 39, emphasis original)

In his statement, Misra regards Sanskrit as the parent of Hindi, but not of Urdu. He very much like Shiva Prasad treats Urdu words, along with Persian and Arabic words as “mercenaries”, “foreigners” and “invaders”. This is a process of “othering” of the Urdu language and its speakers. In the last line, Misra also makes it clear that Urdu cannot be a legitimate symbol of the Indian nation because foreigners cannot be accorded this privileged status. Implicit in the whole argument about the foreignness of Urdu is also the issue of authenticity; Hindi by being indigenous to the people of India has the authenticity required to be a valid symbol of the Indian nation. Urdu, by contrast, because of its “foreignness”, lacks the legitimacy to be so.

The narrative of “foreignness” also finds its expression in literature produced in the late nineteenth century. King (1989, 1992) examines the representation of Hindi and Urdu in an allegorical play written by Pandit Gauri Datta in the later half of the nineteenth century in which Persian, the language of Iran, is presented as the mother of Urdu.

The construction of the Urdu script and language as ‘foreign’ is interesting, because the Persian script from which it is adapted had been in India for about seven centuries. The Persian language and script arrived in India in the beginning of the eleventh century when Mahmud of Ghazna (971–1030) founded the first Muslim empire in the Northwest of India. The decline of his rule was followed by the establishment of another Muslim dynasty known as the Delhi Sultanate (1192–1526), which ruled India until the arrival of yet another Muslim empire, the Mughals (1526–1857). They governed India until the arrival of the British, whose rule ended with the independence of India in 1947. Persian remained the official language during the entire Muslim rule. Rahman (2002) notes, “Indeed according to the details furnished by Abdul Ghani, Persian

literature was well-established under the Ghaznavids, the Khiljis, and the Tughlaqs before Babur entered India in 1526” (p. 124). Besides being the language of administration, Persian was also the language of literature, sciences, and arts. William Jones, who wrote in the eighteenth century, thought that the Persian language was ‘rich melodious and elegant’ and thus needed to be studied (Cohn, 1985:285).

The presence of Persian in India implies the use of the Persian script, which later became the foundation for the creation of the Urdu script. So, the Persian script in some form had been in use in India for several centuries before it began to be attacked for its defects during the nineteenth century language ideological debate. I therefore argue that the attack on the linguistic effectiveness of the Urdu script during the nineteenth century did not emanate from purely orthographic concerns; it actually manifests and at the same time constitutes a broader social struggle for the assertion of Hindu identity.

In terms of Irvine and Gal’s theoretical model, the process of foreignization of Urdu is an example of iconization and erasure, whereby linguistic forms such as script and words are linked with social categories of foreignness. It is through the process of iconization of Urdu with foreignness that Urdu is discredited and Hindi is legitimized as the language of India.

6.2. *Fraudulent vs. honest*

The process of iconization was not confined to treating the Urdu script and words as foreign; it also involved personifying the Urdu script as deceitful and treacherous. In the debate, the discourse of ‘forgery’ was supported by two main types of argument; one of them was purely orthographic in nature. The focus of this line of argument was to show that the Urdu script lacked a perfect relationship between graphemes and phonemes. Hindus further argued that vowels in Urdu are not always marked, which lend Urdu words to multiple readings, which ultimately leads to immense confusion. The second line of argument was centered on the horrible social consequences that arose out of the alleged shortcomings in the script, in particular how the drawbacks impeded legal processes and often resulted in miscarriage of justice. I discuss the second argument separately in section 6.3 below.

It was argued that the fraudulent character of the script and language stemmed from their orthographic shortcomings. Attempts were made to calculate mathematically the number of possible readings that a word or syllable written in the Urdu script could have. This promiscuous nature of the script was then held responsible for causing fraud and forgery. Raja Harishchandra, an important leader of the Hindi movement, observed:

... make a mark like سر and suppose it to be the name of some village. If we take the first letter to be ب (b) it can be pronounced in eleven different ways; babar, bapar, batar, (with ت) and battar (with ت) basar, banar, bahr, bayar, ber, bair, bir; again, if we take the first letter to be پ (p) س (s), ت (t), ٹ (t), ن (n), ہ (h), or ی (y) it can be pronounced in 77 more different ways. If we change the vowel points of the first eight words given above, we will have 64 more words ... Again if we will take the first letter to be ز (z) or ر (r) we get 304 more words ... If we change the last letter of the same word into ب (b) we can have a thousand new different pronunciations. *May God save us from such letters!!!. What wonders cannot be performed through their medium? Black can be changed into white and white into black.* (CCPE, 1897, Appendix: 98, emphasis mine)

Here, Harishchandra tries to discredit and delegitimize the Urdu script on the grounds that the one-syllable word سر /səɾ/ has the possibility of being read in a thousand different ways. Of

course, this is blatantly false of the Urdu script; in fact, it cannot be true of any script in the world. Even in other writing systems where not all vowels are marked, for example Arabic, there are principles which determine what constitutes a possible or an impossible word. Moreover, there are other linguistic and extra-linguistic contextual clues that help in the correct identification of the written word. We know that no text is produced or consumed in a social or linguistic void. Readers do not understand a text by apprehending meanings of individual words, but rather by establishing a relationship between words in a text on the one hand and their relationship to our world knowledge on the other. Smith, who is a scholar of reading remarks:

All learning and comprehension is interpretation, understanding an event from its context (or putting the event into a context). All reading of print is interpretation, making sense of print. *You don't worry about specific letters or even words when you read, any more than you care particularly about headlights and tires, when you identify a car.* The best strategy for determining the identity of meaning of an unfamiliar word is to work out what it is from context. (2004:3; emphasis mine)

Harishchandra then projects this alleged defect of the Urdu language and script onto Muslims. According to him, the script was like a weapon that Muslims used to plunder India. He argues, 'By the introduction of the Nagari character they would lose entirely the opportunity of plundering the world by reading one word for another and misconstruing the real sense of the contents' (in Sengupta:86). His argument shows that script and literacy practices are not merely a technological issue of representing spoken languages on paper; they are a socially situated phenomenon, loaded with issues of power and social identities.¹⁶

Using a metaphorical expression of 'changing black into white and white into black' Harishchandra further argues that the Urdu script is totally unreliable and untrustworthy. His appeal to God to save people from the Urdu script implies that the script poses some kind of a social or moral danger from which the society needs to be rescued. In contrast to Harishchandra's figurative characterization of the inherently mendacious nature of the Urdu script, many others were more straightforward and blunt in their disparagement of the Urdu script. The CCPE in a discussion of the pros and cons of the Urdu and Hindi scripts comments, "What is written in Urdu is not read. There are many chances of *fraud and forgery being committed in Urdu writing on account of various defects found in it*; while it is not the case with Hindi Bhasha [language]" (1897:95, emphasis mine).

This line of argument denigrating the Urdu script was not new; it had already been presented about three decades earlier by Shiva Prasad. In his 1868 memorandum, Shiva Prasad characterizes the Urdu script in these terms: "Conceive the same letter or the little stroke (ٲ) to be read as ba bi bu pa pi pu ta ti tu Ta Ti Tu sa si su na ni nu ya yi and yu" (1868:4). Shiva Prasad argues here that the symbol (ٲ), a common orthographic form used to represent some phonemes of Urdu, with additional diacritics, is capable of generating a multiplicity of readings. This unconstrained capacity of the script, he argues, renders it vulnerable to chances of fraud and forgery. Here, Shiva Prasad appears to be a forerunner in the construction of the fraud narrative, which was later quoted and re-quoted as a means of authenticating the discourse of 'defectiveness' of Urdu. Harishchandra and others who followed him seem to be building on this discourse and at the same time improvising upon it.

It was not only the official memoranda that were engaged in the campaign belittling the Urdu script; the issue was a matter of intense debate among the ordinary people of

¹⁶ See Street (1995) for an ideological model of literacy.

North India too. Therefore, the projection of the Urdu script as evil and liable to fraud and forgery is also commonly found in newspaper reports of the time. In a report published in the newspaper Jagat Samachar of 19 April 1869, the writer responding favorably to a government plan to replace the Urdu script with Devanagari points out the ‘evils’ inherent in the Urdu script. He argues:

All know the defects of the Oordoo[Urdu], and the advantages of the Nagree [Devanagari] character: how great is the *evil*, when it is considered that only the servants of the Court understand the papers of the Court, and even they are sometimes confused, *owing to words being written one way, and read in another . . .* But apart from this, each one writes in his own way, and how varied is the style of writing; while there is such *mystery* in the formation of the letters, that after they are written, the *meaning of the words they form can be changed*. (SVNP, 1869:199, emphasis mine)

This example, like the previous ones, starts with the technical defects of Urdu and concludes by describing the fraud and forgery that may result from them. However, there is another point worth noting about the ideology expressed here. The writer argues that the script is confusing not only to ordinary people, but even the trained specialists at the court are not sure about words written in it. Reading this, one might get an impression that the Urdu script is almost impossible to learn, let alone perfect. I will return to this point in more detail in section 6.4 below. Secondly, the writer also claims that there is hardly anything in common between the writings of two individuals because ‘each one writes in his own way’. Moreover, the script is somehow so ‘mysterious’, the claim goes, that no one could figure out how the letters are formed. An inevitable consequence of this, the writer claims, is that the meaning of words is susceptible to manipulations, resulting ultimately in fraud and forgery.

6.3. *Biased vs. impartial*

Another element of ideology found in the data, related to the fraud and forgery discourse discussed above is that the Urdu script is a *source* and *cause* of injustice. One of the few arguments advanced in support of the Urdu script was that it could be written faster than Devanagari. The CCPE, accepting this as a positive feature of the Urdu script, however, asserts that the time saved in writing in the Urdu script is often offset by the time squandered in deciphering the correct reading. Moreover, in dealing with public matters, the larger issue of justice and impartiality should supersede any other considerations including the speed of writing:

Any little saving of time that may possibly be effected in recording proceedings in *shikasta* [Urdu script], is more than counterbalanced by the time and labour lost later on in reading it, and the *doubts and disputes that arise every now and again regarding the correctness of a reading*. On the other hand, any little loss of time that may occur in writing the proceedings in Nagri, would be amply compensated by the *ease and absolute freedom from doubt* with which the Nagri record can be read ever afterwards. (1897:21, emphasis mine)

The CCPE argues that the Nagari script, on the other hand, is absolutely easy to read and free from any possible misreading. The CCPE goes on to describe the ultimate benefit that the introduction of Devanagari will achieve: “Besides, the saving of public time is after all an end subordinate to the *claims of justice and public convenience*” (1897:21, emphasis mine). By this argument, Urdu is declared to be an unsuitable script for a fair and just transaction of official

business; the implication is that the only script that rises to fulfill the goals of fairness and impartiality is Devanagari.

Earlier examples of the evil consequences of the Urdu script came from the intellectual debate on its technical inefficiency. An article written in the newspaper *Bharat Bandhu*, published on June 15, 1883 provides a concrete example of how the Urdu script can cause injustice and bring misery to people. The writer shows that the Urdu script is responsible for inflicting financial loss on people. He refers to the execution of a court order in which justice was denied to the plaintiff because of the ambiguity caused by the Urdu script. The case involved impounding a farmer's crops. But, by mistake his neighbor's crops were also impounded by the local administration. The aggrieved neighbor went to the court asking for the restoration of his crops, but the Urdu script came in the way of justice. The paper reports what happened:

One of the neighbours submitted a petition to the court praying for the restoration of his *pachis man pukhta gandum*, i.e. 25 maunds of wheat by the standard weight. His claim was supported by evidence of his witnesses. When the judge sat to write his judgment, he read *pachis man pukhta gandum* as *pachis man bejhar gandum* i.e. 25 maunds of mixed corn and wheat and asked the petitioner's pleader what it was. The pleader also misread it like the judge. The court rejected the petition on the ground that the petitioner referred to mixed corn and wheat in the petition, while his witnesses made no mention of mixed corn. *The poor man had thus to suffer great loss. . . . If the Hindi character were substituted in place of the Urdu character, no such misunderstanding would ever arise and the people would be protected from loss.* (SVNP, 1883:521, emphasis mine)

In the above example, the aggrieved person suffered financial loss because of the technical inferiority of the Urdu script, which could not make a distinction between whether the claim was about pure wheat or mixed corn and wheat. Notice that here also like Harishchandra's argument above the Urdu script is portrayed as a source of danger and a social evil from which people need to be saved. The introduction of the Hindi character, the Devanagari script, in place of Urdu, it is argued, will automatically ensure fairness and justice to people.

The same newspaper, commenting on the report that the Government had issued a circular to district officers making a proposal regarding the Nagari script, noted: "the substitution of Hindi in place of Urdu as the court language would be a real *boon* to the country and protect the people from these *inconveniences and frauds* to which they are at present exposed" (SVNP, 1883:536, emphasis mine). The introduction of Devanagari, the newspaper claims, is a blessing for the people, because they will be saved from injustices caused by the Urdu script.

The belief that the Urdu script was an impediment to the process of dispensing justice was a recurring theme in the metalinguistic discourse of the time. The CCPE presents numerous cases of legal disputes arising mainly out of the allegedly mistaken readings of names, places, etc. I mention only a few below to illustrate the point. The CCPE cites a memorial submitted by Dev Nagree Pracharni Sabha, The Society for the Promotion of Devanagari (Meerut) to the Education Commission¹⁷ in which the petitioners provided a number of arguments in favor of introducing Devanagari, including court cases where Urdu was either the reason for the miscarriage of justice or an impediment, at least, to a fair judicial transaction. The memorialists mention a report published in *Vidya Parkashak*, a monthly journal published from Lahore in which a judge could

¹⁷ The Education Commission, also known after its chairperson W.W. Hunter, as the Hunter Commission was set up in 1882 to enquire into the status of primary education in India. It submitted its report in 1884; it did not make any recommendations on the issue of the Hindi or Urdu script.

not decide whether the petitioner had purchased salt or bond, because the Urdu script could not distinguish between the two:

When a man submitted a petition to the Sub-Judge's Court at Amritsar, in which it was written that according to the account books (بھی کہاتے کی رو سے) a bond (تمسک) was purchased. The Serishtadar read this phrase that according to the books salt was purchased (بھی کہاتے کی رو سے نمک خریدا گیا). The petitioner exclaimed that bond and not salt was purchased by him. The Serishtadar appears to injure his case. The Subordinate Judge asked the Serishtadar about this who replied that *bond (تمسک) and salt (نمک) were and are written and read in Urdu in the same way.* (CCPE, 1897, Appendix: 95, emphasis mine)

The above examples not only show the process of iconization whereby the Urdu script is iconized as a symbol of dishonesty, they also illustrate how this ideology reduces the complexity of the whole judicial process to the single issue of script. It completely erases from discussion other social and political factors that contribute to or impede the dispensation of justice. Even the linguistic and discourse contexts in which words occur are totally ignored. Homographs and homophones do not lend themselves to multiple meanings, if presented in an appropriate sociolinguistic context. It is hard to believe that the words for 'salt' and 'bond' could not be distinguished in the legal document, even if one assumes that they were written in the same way, which they usually are not. In terms of Irvine and Gal's theoretical model, this is an example par excellence of erasure.

The iconization of Urdu as fraudulent and Hindi as virtuous also reverberated in some Hindi plays written in the nineteenth century. King (1989, 1992) discusses Pandit Gauri Datta's play *Devanagari aur Urdu ka svang arthat Devanagari aur Urdu ka ek natak* (A play of Hindi and Urdu) published in the 1880's, and Munshi Sohan Prasad's play *Hindi aur Urdu ki Larai* (The fight of Hindi and Urdu) in terms of their representation of Urdu as vice and Hindi as virtue. These plays are allegorical in nature and have Urdu and Hindi represented by Begum Urdu and Queen Devanagari. Queen Devanagari's pleader argues:

... [Queen Devanagari] teaches righteousness and removes falsehood, and that under her rule people could become merry, become wealthy, carry on their business, and learn wisdom. Bribery ... would weep at the very sound of her name, and *fabrication and fraud would disappear should she rule again.* (King, 1989:180, emphasis mine)

Urdu on the other hand was represented as the following:

This is my work—passion I'll teach,
Tasks of your household we'll leave in the breach.
We'll be lovers and rakes, living for pleasure,
Consorting with prostitutes, squandering our treasure ...
Lie to your betters and flatter each other
Write down one thing and read out another.

(King, 1989:181, emphasis mine)

The narrative of Urdu as the language that encourages fraud resonates perfectly with Harishchandra's statement on the fraudulent character of Urdu we have seen earlier. Here, there are additional layers of iconization, however. The Urdu language and script are held responsible for inculcating passion, as opposed to sublime love that Hindi/Devanagari represents. Urdu is also seen as responsible for destroying domestic life and as belonging to a dissolute section of society—prostitutes.

6.4. *Difficult vs. easy*

Another element of ideology that recurs in these documents is the claim about the rapidity with which Hindi can be acquired by people interested in learning it. By contrast, the claim goes that even years of training are not sufficient to acquire the ability to read and write Urdu.

As regard legibility, even the *muharrirs*,¹⁸ who are trained from their childhood to read and write the *Shikasta*¹⁹ [the Urdu script] as the means of earning their living, and who can, generally speaking, read it better than any other class of persons, are not rarely seen fumbling in courts over some word or phrase in almost every paper that they read. (CCPE, 1897:16)

The Urdu script is so difficult to learn, the CCPE argues, that it is not only the poor lower-level clerks at courts who cannot read it, but also the higher-level judges and magistrates who often have difficulty reading this script. The CCPE goes on to say, ‘it may well be doubted, if half the numbers of Native Judges and Magistrates of all grades, and legal practitioners, Mahomedan as well as Hindu, who belong to the courts of these provinces, can by themselves read the court papers with *unfaltering ease and correctness*’ (CCPE, 1897:16, emphasis original). It appears from the statement that there is hardly anyone who can decipher the mysterious Urdu script correctly.

The ideology of the acquisitional ease of Hindi/Devanagari and the insurmountable difficulties in learning the Urdu language/script is also a major feature of the nineteenth century public discourse. The Muir Gazette of 7 May 1869 published an article in favor of adopting the Devanagari script. The writer, while echoing the same ideology, takes the discourse of the facility of Devanagari to an incredibly high level. To him, it takes only a few days to perfect the Devanagari script, whereas even years of work may not guarantee successful learning of the Urdu script. He notes, “there is no character *so easy as Nagree*, and a few day’s tuition will make one perfect in it; not so with *Oordoo and Persian, which cannot be learned under many years*” (SVNP, 1869:226, emphasis mine).

The following statement quoted earlier in a different context, also provides an example of the respective difficulty and ease of Urdu and Hindi scripts. Writing in the newspaper Jagat Samachar of 19 April 1869, a writer argues:

All know the defects of the Oordoo[Urdu], and the advantages of the Nagree character: how great is the evil, when it is considered that only the servants of the Court understand the papers of the Court, and even they are sometimes confused, owing to words being written one way, and read in another . . . *Even gentlemen who have done the work of these Courts for twelve years or more are unable to read the Court papers.* (SVNP, 1869:199, emphasis mine)

In this statement too, the writer argues that Urdu is not only difficult for ordinary people to learn, but even officers with years of experience in court cannot read Urdu documents properly.

6.5. *Messy vs. perfect*

Reinforcing the ideology of the acquisitional ease of Hindi was the ideology of technical superiority of the Hindi script and inferiority of the Urdu script. The ideology holds that

¹⁸ *Muharrirs* during the Mughal and early British rule functioned like scribes or clerks.

¹⁹ *Shikasta* is one of the hands in which Urdu used to be written. Other popular styles are *Naskh*, *Nastaliq*, etc.

Devanagari is a completely phonological alphabet; each grapheme represents one and only one phoneme, and one phoneme is represented by one and only one grapheme. The relationship between graphemes and sounds that they represent is perfect. In fact, it is so perfect that one can read words even without knowing their meanings. The Urdu script by contrast is argued to lack this feature. The CCPE quotes an article published in the daily newspaper *The Pioneer* on July 10, 1873:

. . . the Nagri alphabet is slowly written; but when once written it is as clear as print, and *so definite that a sentence expressed in it can be read with faultless pronunciation by a person who has not the remotest idea of its meaning*. Thus so far as alphabets are concerned, the question lies between immediate convenience on the one hand and, and *permanence*, and *accuracy* on the other. (Appendix: 43, emphasis mine)

The belief in the technical superiority of Devanagari as a piece of language ideology is also commonly found among ordinary people of North India. It is evidenced in articles, rejoinders, etc. published in local language newspapers. In an article published in the newspaper *Chashm-i-Ilahi* on February 16, 1871, the author presents arguments in support of the unsuitability of the Urdu script and concludes by saying, “The writer is further of opinion, and says it is generally admitted, that the *Nagri character is more correctly written, more correctly pronounced, and more easily acquired*—indeed in all respects superior to Persian” (SVNP, 1871:74–75, emphasis mine). Here the two ideologies of technological superiority and acquisitional rapidity have merged into one.

The issue of script was considered important not only for the narrow confines of the law courts; it was argued to be vitally significant for the larger cause of education—in particular primary education. The issue of primary education and its relationship with script therefore is explored in the following section.

6.6. *Inhibiter vs. facilitator (of education)*

In addition to constructing the Urdu script as technically inefficient and socially undesirable, the CCPE also claims that the use of Urdu was largely responsible for the poor quality of primary education in the NW Provinces and Oudh. It notes, “There are other considerations, however, which demand the restoration of the people’s tongue and character to their proper position And those are the important interests of primary education and the general progress of the mass of the people inhabiting these provinces” (CCPE, 1897:22). Here, the CCPE argues that the success of primary education is contingent upon script. The authors of the CCPE provide a number of statistical tables in support of their claim. They give figures comparing the performance of students in primary schools from other states in India to show the success of primary education (or lack of it) in different states. They show that the number of students in primary school is extremely low in the NW Provinces and Oudh as compared to other states. According to them, the reason for this is:

The comparative statement clearly shows the primary education has had a most healthy expansion in the Provinces of Bombay, Bengal and Madras. And in all those Provinces the vernaculars of the people are in use in courts. The Provinces where the progress of primary education has been poorest and most discouraging are the N-W.P. and Oudh and the Punjab. And these are the only Provinces in India where the vernaculars of the people are not recognised as the languages of the courts and public offices, and vernacular education is at a woful [sic] discount! (CCPE, 1897:35)

Although the argument above is couched in terms of language, the issue was primarily that of script, because the main demand of the memorandum was the introduction of the Devanagari script. The analysis reduces the reasons for the poor results of primary education to one single issue—that of script. Other social, political and economic factors that impact primary education are totally erased from the analysis. Babu Shiva Prasad, Education Inspector, who has been quoted above, treads the same line of argument:

Primary schools did not flourish much in the Punjab because Muhammadans there had Persian characters and Persian books introduced in them. The secret of the success of Bengal lies in that nutshell. There they have the same national characters for the courts, the mansions, the firms, the farms, the shops, the cities, and the villages. *Use Hindi characters in the courts of North-Western Provinces and Oudh, and I am ready to undertake again, even in this my old age, the duties of an Inspector till I beat Bengal in the number of boys under instruction or else lose my pension.* (CCPE, 1897:41, emphasis original)

This statement like the previous one purporting to explain the backwardness of primary education reveals the hegemony of the Hindi language ideology; through the process of erasure of other relevant factors, the ideology places the blame for the miserable failure of primary education entirely on the Urdu script. The simplification and reduction of such a complex phenomenon as primary education to the singular issue of script is an example of erasure. The strategy of erasure is adopted as a technique to dismiss other relevant factors from the analysis so that script emerges as *the* reason for the lack of success in primary education in the province.

7. Indexical meaning of Urdu and Hindi

An important outcome of the language debate discussed above was that Urdu and Hindi began to index Muslim and Hindu identities respectively. Prior to the debate, neither the Urdu language nor the script was exclusively associated with any religious groups. Alam (1998) notes that during Akbar's rule (1542–1605) the proclamation declaring Persian as the language of administration was issued by Todar Mal, a Hindu revenue minister. Todar Mal was not the only Hindu in the Mughal administration; in fact as Alam points out, 'a substantial part of the administration was carried out by the indigenous Hindu communities . . . They learnt Persian and joined these Iranians as clerks, scribes and secretaries (*muharrir* and *munshis*). Their achievement in the [Persian] language was soon to be extraordinary' (Alam, 1998:326). Alam further notes that the departments of accountancy, revenue and draftsmanship were dominated largely by Hindus. In fact many Hindus such as Chandrabhan, Khwaja Tej Bhan, Sujan Rai, Anand Ram Mukhlis, Bindrabhan Khushgo wrote books in Persian, which were included in the curriculum used by teachers at *madrasas*, traditional Islamic schools, where Muslim pupils received their education. Hindus also contributed to other fields of knowledge. Alam notes:

Certain fields hitherto unexplored or neglected found skilled investigators, chiefly Hindus. On the philological sciences the Hindus produced excellent works in the eighteenth century. Mir'āt ul Istilāh of Ānand Rām, Bahār-i 'Ajam of Tek Chand 'Bahār' and Mustalahāt-us-Shu'arā of Siyalkoti Ma1 'Wārasta' are among the most exhaustive lexicons compiled in India. (1998:328)

After the glory of Persian began to fade and Urdu grew in strength and prestige, Hindus and Muslims used it alike for literary purposes. It is impossible to list the names of all Hindu poets, writers, critics, and journalists who wrote in Urdu, because they are in large numbers. It will

suffice here to mention a Hindu writer, Ratneshwar Prasad Salik's view on the Urdu language and its indexical meaning, "we have both together *created a new language—the Urdu language—which was neither our language nor theirs*. Urdu is the strongest foundation and the biggest symbol of the national unity. May this language live, so we both live!" (in Palvi, 1982:6; emphasis mine).²⁰ His statement clearly demonstrates that neither the Urdu language nor the script was indexical of Muslim identity prior to the nineteenth century language ideological debates.

Dalmia asserts the absence of any indexical links between Urdu, Hindi and Muslim and Hindu identities in nineteenth century India. She remarks, "Urdu and Hindavi [Hindi] had little to do with the religion of the people who used it, or with script alone. If there was a divide, it was the urban-rural divide . . ." (1997:159). Many nineteenth century writings provide further evidence. Joseph Garcin de Tassy, a nineteenth century French Indologist, in response to the demand for the recognition of Hindi as the language of law courts, says, ". . . Urdu is the *language of cities*. Hindi is used only *in rural areas*, and even in Hindi a lot of words of Arabic and Persian have become common. Ordinary people in cities speak Urdu, and Urdu is used in government offices" (de Tassy, 1964:27, emphasis mine). Similarly Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, a prominent Muslim leader of the time in his testimony to the Education Commission argued in favor of retaining Urdu as the language of courts on the ground that it was the language of urban and educated people (Rai, 2000). In fact Harishchandra and Shiva Prasad whose ideologies I analyzed above, themselves knew Urdu and wrote extensively in it.²¹

The above discussion clearly demonstrates that, in the nineteenth century, the existing opposition of rurality and urbanity was recursively employed at the level of religion so that Hindi became indexical of Hindus and Urdu that of Muslims. This illustrates the semiotic process of fractal recursivity. However, the sociolinguistic fact that both Muslims and Hindus used Urdu or Hindi depending on their urban or rural affiliation does not square with Harishchandra's ideology that Urdu is the language of only Muslims and not of Hindus. He therefore had to explain it away by arguing, "It [Urdu] is the language of dancing girls and prostitutes. The *depraved sons of wealthy Hindus* and youths of substance [sic] and loose character, when in the society of harlots, concubines, and pimps speak Urdu. . ." (Rai, 2000:42, emphasis mine).

Here, Harishchandra dismisses the Hindu speakers of Urdu as simply 'depraved sons of wealthy Hindus'. He does not stop at that; he in fact claims that even the depraved sons of Hindus speak Urdu only when 'in the society of harlots, concubines, and pimps'. His claim is that real Hindus, Hindus of high moral strength, do not speak Urdu or speak in some debauched corner of society. This process of eliminating sociolinguistic facts that do not agree with the ideology is an example of the semiotic process of erasure. Shiva Prasad, in a similar vein, succinctly claims, "Those who did not aspire or seek to gain the favor of the Muhammadans by becoming, if not altogether, *half Muhammadanized*, still valued Hindi works, left by Tulsidas, Surdas, Kabir . . ." (CCPE, 1897:72, emphasis mine). Here again the goal is to explain away a painful sociolinguistic reality, quite derogatorily, by stating that only those Hindus, who in their lust for power had become half-Muslims, spoke Urdu. By implication, real Hindus of respectable moral character did not use Urdu.

In sum, the above discussion shows that Hindi and Urdu were not indexical of Hindu and Muslim identities before the nineteenth century. They were indexical of the level of education or social class. Educated Hindus and Muslims both used Urdu; uneducated people regardless of

²⁰ See Srivastav (1969), Dard (1972, 1974), and Palvi (1982) for a detailed discussion of Hindu writers of the Urdu language.

²¹ Sengupta (1994) shows the conflict in Harishchandra's political ideology against Urdu and his personal love for it.

their religious identity used regional dialects. The Hindi movement employed this existing opposition recursively at the level of religion, so that Hindi and Urdu began to index Hindu and Muslim identities, respectively.²²

7.1. Summary and conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that language ideological debates provide useful data for the study of the discursive construction of social identities. Using a language ideology framework, I have argued that the processes of denigrating the Urdu language and script and valorizing the Hindi language and script were discursive acts aimed at the construction of Hindu identity. Although a significant portion of the debate appears to focus on orthographic aspects of Urdu and Hindi, I have shown that the debate was actually an attempt to envision and create a new sociolinguistic order in which Hindi and Urdu and their speakers would have radically different social and cultural values. I have demonstrated that the Hindi language ideology was realized through the semiotic processes of *iconization*, *fractal recursivity*, and *erasure*.

Language ideological debates are important for their social consequences too. Blommaert (1999) discusses two types of language ideological debates—formative and inconsequential. The former bring about changes in the sociolinguistic space of the people involved in the debate. The latter simply fail, in that they do not alter the sociolinguistic situation, nor do they rework the power structure in the society. The Hindi language ideology falls into the first category. The immediate consequence of the debate was that the colonial government brought about an act in 1900, three years after the publication of the CCPE, which allowed the use of Devanagari in courts of law. The long-term outcome of the debate was that Urdu increasingly began to be seen as a language of Muslims. Consequently, Hindus began to gradually distance themselves from Urdu. Many Hindus writing in Urdu shifted to Hindi. Premchand (1880–1936), a prolific writer of the early twentieth century, crossed over from the Urdu sociolinguistic space into Hindi during his lifetime. He, in fact, rewrote some of his earlier Urdu works in Hindi. The repositioning of the indexical value of Urdu also had an impact on the maintenance of Urdu among Hindus. Many Hindus who did excellent work in Urdu as poets, writers, critics, journalists, and playwrights in the first half of the twentieth century found it socially inappropriate to transfer the Urdu language and script to their children. There are several living examples of Hindu authors of Urdu, born during the early twentieth century, whose children do not know the language or the script. This further helped in strengthening the ideology that Urdu is the language of Muslims.

Furthermore, the polarization of the sociolinguistic field became so intense in later years that the possession of the Urdu script became an act of declaring one's religious identity. In separate fieldwork research that I conducted in 2006, a 75-year-old Hindu while narrating stories of the massacre of Muslims and Hindus that took place during the partition of India in 1947, told me that a Hindu resident of Old Delhi was killed by another fellow Hindu, because he was mistaken for being a Muslim. The reason for the confusion of the religious identity was that the victim was holding an Urdu language newspaper in his hands. The murderer, taking cues from the distinct look of the Urdu script concluded that the victim must be a Muslim. This incident demonstrates that languages and scripts not only index social identities in a metaphorical sense, but they may do so literally. The sociolinguistic processes that contributed to the new indexical meaning of the

²² The indexicality of Hindi has become increasingly complex, particularly after the independence of India. Hindi has been adopted as a national official language by the Government of India. Hindi therefore also indexes a national identity.

Urdu language and script during the twentieth century are traced back to the language ideological debate of the nineteenth century that I discussed in this essay.

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