

Much language and identity research focuses on spoken language and shows how various elements of spoken language such as sounds, lexical items, and discourse markers are employed by speakers as a resource to construct different social identities. However, there are not many studies on how speakers (or writers) can use elements of orthography to encode their distinct social identities through written language.

This paper shows how speakers of Urdu, a language traditionally written in the Persian script, after adopting Nagari, the script used for writing Hindi, are innovating new strategies to mark Urdu in Nagari as distinct from Hindi in Nagari. In addition to the use of diacritics for distinctive Urdu sounds, the strategy also involves use of orthographic symbols that are not allowed by Nagari writing conventions. It is important to note that the use of such orthographic symbols does not have any phonetic value, because the symbols do not represent phonemes in Urdu; they appear only in borrowed Arabic words. I argue that the motivation of Urdu speakers to use Nagari orthographic symbols in a way that violates Nagari rules springs from a desire by Urdu speakers/writers to preserve the distinct identity of Urdu in the new Nagari script.

Urdu and Hindi, because of a common genetic ancestry, have a lot of shared elements at different levels of grammar and vocabulary; linguists argue that script is the major differentiating factor between Urdu and Hindi (Rai 1984, King 1994). Moreover, Nagari and the Persian scripts have different sociolinguistic meanings; the former is indexical of Hindu identity, whereas the latter is a marker of Muslim identity (Robert King 2001). Urdu speakers/writers have vehemently opposed demands for the adoption of Nagari for Urdu in order to bridge the divide between Hindi and Urdu; they insist that the Persian script of Urdu constitutes its distinguishing feature (e.g. Sahar 1999). The recent phenomenon of writing Urdu in Nagari therefore marks a turning point in that it has the potential of liquidating the very distinct status of Urdu from Hindi. The innovation introduced by speakers of Urdu into Nagari is in response to this perceived threat of loss of identity of Urdu.

This study is based on an analysis of a popular Urdu monthly magazine *Mahakta Aanchal*, published in Nagari script from Delhi. The target readership of the magazine is the young generation of Muslim boys and girls who do not know the Persian script. I analyze the text of the magazine to show the strategies that have been adopted to retain features of Urdu in Nagari. I also analyze data from *Muntakhab Ahadis*, a religious book published originally in the Persian script, which has recently been converted into Nagari. Both these materials support my argument that Urdu speakers/writers are adopting Nagari for writing Urdu but at the same time altering it in order to leave traces of their language and their original script in Nagari. Furthermore, both publishers and readers of the magazine believe that the language of the magazine is Urdu despite the fact that it is written in Nagari.

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