

Language, Social Class, and Power: A Critical Social Analysis (CSA) of English and Urdu Proverbs

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Abstract: Proverbs are expressions of wisdom, which serve as the representatives of cultural values and societal norms. They are loaded with cultural and religious connotations. The present research attempts to decode Urdu and English proverbs to lay bare underlying ideologies and power dynamics embedded in the selected proverbs. The data for the study related to English and Urdu proverbs has been collected from the Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs by Jennifer Speake and Urdu Zarb-ul-Imsal by Nazeer Ahmad Tashna. It employs Fairclough's (2012) Critical Social analysis (CSA) research design to analyze the data. This model deals with the concepts of language, power, and economy. It argues that in order to analyse language comprehensively one needs to know about Marxist and Normative critique of language. The Findings of the study reveal that the concept of positive representation of power and negative representation of powerless is a prominent feature of Urdu and English proverbs. The study contends that the concept of power is knowledge, and instead of knowledge, power is pliable through the proverbs. The concept of honor and power has mostly been associated with power. It finds that discourses are class-specific and highlight the existing order of a particular society.

Key Words: Proverbs, Ideology, Class, Language, Economy, CSA

Introduction

Norrick, (2014) argues that proverbs are studied from the folkloristic, lexicographic, and linguistic perspectives and there exists agreement about their salient features. Every language has its proverbs, which carry a particular structure and significant cultural attributes. (Zhao, 2012) suggests that social proverbs reflect the deeply rooted ideologies and cultural signs, which affect our consciousness. Since proverbs are considered the reflection of a particular culture and its traditions, the proverbs of different languages might vary from each other depending upon the context. They are a rich source of representation of attitudes towards a variety of subjects including class, social status, power, gender, emotions, and the concept of othering. Proverbs serve the function of the social mirror depicting every detail and change that occurs in a society and reflecting the cultural heritage of a particular nation. (Zhao, 2012) defines proverbs as "metaphors which are transferred from one generation to another". They reflect the psychological, mental, social, and intellectual development of the people by keeping a record of the social values and changes occurring in a society with the passage of time. This can be observed from the fact that courage and bravery were portrayed in the proverbs of the pre-Islamic era while political disputes between Umayyads and Abbasids affected the proverbs presenting dominant themes of power struggle and rivalry (Yeganeh et al., 2024).

Language and Social Class

Guy, (1988) asserts that language and social class are interlinked and socio-political changes can be observed from language. He opines that language is a product of the society it belongs to. In the Marxist

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perspective, social class is based on the common economic interests of a class and hence promotes class conflict. The contrary idea is to define the social class based on production rather than consumption which promotes class unity instead of conflict. Labov and Michael did the stratification according to a linear scale of social rank and named it the socioeconomic class. The three characteristics of the socioeconomic class include occupation, education, and family income. In this way, a hierarchy of status is established and linguistic variables are aligned in accordance with a linear social scale (Guy, 1988). Nesbit, (2006) believes that class analysis includes the interplay of materialistic concepts, power dynamics, ideologies, and power divisions.

Language, Ideology, and Marxism

Philips, (1992) opines that language plays a central role in propagating the ideology. Language is a tool to communicate the ideational content of everyday dealings and hence it is responsible for the promulgation of ideologies. A Marx-influenced approach to language ideologies suggests that the political-economic position (base) of different groups of people decides their ideologies of language (superstructure). These dominant and subordinate structural positions within a society due to power relations shape the nature of ideology.

The present study highlights the role of language in Urdu and English proverbs in propagating certain ideologies related to the economy and the process of social class struggle. A comparative study of Urdu and English proverbs highlights both the common perspectives and competing ideologies in both languages and helps us understand the cultural approaches towards social class through language. The research aims to project the relationship between the discourse of social class in proverbs and the social structures related to it. It explains how language is a product of social elements and how social elements are reinforced and internalized through language. Along with providing deeper insights into the power dynamics in the representation of social class, the study draws a comparison between the trends and perceptions of social class in two different cultures through the discourses of their proverbs.

Research Questions

- ▶ How is ideology related to social class disseminated discursively through Urdu and English Proverbs?
- ▶ How do these proverbs vary in disseminating ideology related to social class and power dynamics?

Literature Review

This section critically analyzes the previously conducted research in a similar domain chronologically in order to generate the gap for the present study.

Norricks, (2014) defines proverbs as pithy, complete utterances capable of performing a speech act, carrying cultural matrix and tradition, and suitable for cross-cultural comparison. This implies that proverbs inherit certain characteristics of the culture from where they originated. Mieder, (2014) opines that any individual can create a proverb that is full of wisdom possesses certain stylistic and linguistic features, and gets acceptance in oral and written communication among the folk. The criteria of acceptance among folks suggest that the proverbs vary from culture to culture depending upon the ideologies and notions of the people from their social and cultural perspectives. Mac Coinnigh, (2015) is of the view that the proverbs of different languages mostly reflect socio-political tendencies of a particular context.

(Rasul, 2015) conducted a critical social analysis of Urdu and English proverbs on the issue of gender and power relations. It highlights cultural diversity embedded in proverbs. The data for English proverbs was collected from 'The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs', Third Edition 1970, reprinted in 1990 and for Urdu proverbs the data was collected from 'Dili ki khwatin ki kahawatain aur Muhawary' written by Shaista Suharwardi Ikram-Ullah, 2005. The findings of the study reveal the socio-cultural weak, submissive, and negative image of women through language (Rasul, 2015). The present study correlates with the aforementioned one because it also attempts to comparatively analyze the English and Urdu proverbs.

(Khan & Awan, 2020) conducted a comparative lingua-cultural analysis of Punjabi and African proverbs to give an insight into the ideologies and preferred code of conduct within a society. This study employed the theoretical framework of the lingua-cultural approach (Petrova, 2019). The data related to the semantic domain of speech for this research was collected from the dictionaries of proverbs Bajwa, 2011 and Owomyela, 2013. The findings of the study reveal the belief system about the idea of speech, the accepted do's and don'ts within the society, and positive and negative points of view about speech in the respective cultures (Khan & Awan, 2020). The study in hand correlates with the mentioned ones as it also critically decodes Urdu and English proverbs from CSA perspective.

Exploring the position of women in society through their representation in Urdu proverbs, Jawed et al., (2022) conducted a feminist critical discourse analysis which concluded that proverbs reflect traditional thinking and the language represents the conventional female roles within the society without challenging the power dynamics. This study relates to the present study as it also seeks to understand the language use in proverbs and its relation to the society.

(Ali et al., (2023) conducted the paremiological analysis of English and Pashto proverbs employing the pragmatic tools of inquiry. The data for this research was collected from dictionaries. The findings of the study highlight the common and differing perceptions of bravery and honor in the context of their culture and societies. This implies that the analysis of proverbs is a significant tool in cross-cultural studies and observing the relationship between language and society. This study relates to the aforementioned study as both of this attempt to do a cross-cultural analysis of proverbs. .

Theoretical Framework

The study employs Critical Social Analysis by Fairclough, (2012) research design to examine social practices prevalent in a society through proverbs. This model of critical discourse analysis presents the normative as well as explanatory critique of a social event. It provides a structured approach for exploring the dialectical relationship between semiotic and non-semiotic elements of society. Semiotic elements include the analysis of genre, discourse, and styles in the text and how they combine which is referred to as Interdiscursivity. Non-semiotic elements include the social elements i.e. social structures, practices, and events. The model emphasizes how each of these factors; semiotic and non-semiotic, internalize each other and share a relationship to each other. Hence, it helps in revealing hidden ideologies being regulated by language and the role of social practices in shaping the language.

This model has relevance to the study because it helps in the representation of social class by revealing the deeply ingrained ideologies in the language of proverbs. It helps in decoding the text of proverbs by focusing on the textual qualities and then relating it to the broader discursive structures and social practices. It explains how the social elements promote certain prejudices and concepts of social class using language as a tool.

Methodology

This section explains the methodology used for the present research. For the comparative analysis of social class representation in Urdu and English Proverbs, this study follows the qualitative approach. The data related to English proverbs has been collected from the Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs by Jennifer Speake and for extraction of Urdu proverbs, Urdu Zarb-ul-Imsal by Nazeer Ahmad, (2018). The number of proverbs selected for comparison is 25 from each language. The proverbs related to social class have been extracted from the aforementioned sources. The proverbs are then organized into three categories. The categories are as follows:

- ▶ Proverbs Reinforcing Social Stereotypes
- ▶ Proverbs reinforcing marginalization and disempowerment of certain classes
- ▶ Proverbs embody social conflicts and class struggle.

After the organization of data into three categories, these proverbs have been analyzed by applying the Fairclough model of critical discourse analysis (2012). The analysis is done systematically as proposed by Fairclough. In the first step, the social wrong i.e. discrimination based on social class is identified and the semiotic aspect is explored through the language of proverbs focusing on the genre, discourse, and style



along with its textual features. In the next step, the obstacles in identifying the social wrong are identified. In the third step, the need for social order to perpetuate social wrong is assessed. Finally, in the last step, the possible solutions to address and overcome these obstacles are addressed. Following these four steps, the comparative analysis of Urdu and English proverbs has been done by employing the devised research model.

Analysis of Proverbs

In this section, a critical social analysis of proverbs has been done. The three categories of proverbs are as under:

- ▶ Proverbs Reinforcing Social Stereotypes
- ▶ Proverbs reinforcing marginalization and disempowerment of certain classes
- ▶ Proverbs embody the concept of social status and class struggle.

The first category includes the following Urdu proverbs.

Urdu Proverbs

Table 1

S. No	Urdu Proverbs in the first category
1	Jis ki lathi uski bhains
2	Qazi G k ghr k chuhy bhi syany
3	Aamdni k sar sehra hai
4	Kaly k aagy charagh nahi jalta
5	Baron ki bari bat
6	Hm bhi hain panchon swaron me
7	Chikney mu ko sbhi choomty hen
8	Bhat hoga to kawway bohat ayn gy
9	Zaat ki beti zaat hi me jati hai

Fairclough, (2012) argues that language is one of the significant means of exercising power. It plays an important role in making certain ideologies common sense. Similarly, the category of proverbs under analysis reinforces the social stereotypes and dissemination of power politics through the discourses of proverbs. To identify the social wrong from a discursive perspective, the language used to coin proverbs has been critically analyzed. The social wrong represented in these proverbs is the prejudice based on social class. As mentioned earlier, language is used as a powerful tool to disseminate this ideology. Semiotic aspects such as symbolism and metaphors reinforce the biases provided to the people belonging to higher economic social classes. For analysis purposes, one of the proverbs is as under:

“Jis ki Lathi Uski Bhains” (Literal Translation: “Whoever Owns the Stick, Owns the Buffalo”)
(Might is right)

Has been selected through purposive sampling for analysis. The language used in the proverb connotes that in most cases, it is observed that the powerful hold prestigious positions. In the past, it was believed that knowledge is power but now, things are otherwise. One, who holds power, is always in a position to make things common sense for the powerless people. Now the concept of power is knowledge is more acceptable among the masses. The metaphor "stick" is a symbol of coercive use of power. It implies power and ownership, and the army and police to exercise control over the masses have commonly observed control as the use of sticks. The masses are represented through the metaphor of "buffalo".

Fairclough, (2012) argues that power is propagated and resisted through language. He argues that the major obstacle is the naturalization of the ideology of dominance of the powerful through state institutions and cultural practices. Most often, it is observed that discourses are deeply rooted in history and are decoded likewise. Pakistan has a history of feudalism where feudal lords exercise uncontrolled power and no one has the ability to question it. These cultural practices over decades have normalized the trend of social stereotypes. The repetitive political history of coercive power and the cultural practice of patriarchy reinforces the idea that the social order demands this stereotype and biases towards the powerful at the national and domestic levels respectively. The possible solutions to end this social wrong are to bring structural reforms, challenge the deeply-rooted ideology through language, and improve social practices that promote such inequalities.

The first category includes the following English Proverbs.

Table 2

S. No	English Proverbs in the First Category
1	Big fish eat little fish
2	Caesar's wife must be above suspicion
3	Everybody loves a lord
4	Might is right
5	Money makes the mare go
6	The king can do no wrong
7	Never marry for money but marry where the money is
8	Where MAGGREGOR sits is the end of the table

The list of the proverbs mentioned above highlights the dominant belief pattern related to power. All of these proverbs embody the concept of social inequality based on power, which exists in various modalities. Similarly, the following proverb, "The king can do no wrong"

Encompasses social and economic forms of power. It can also be co-related with the concept that there is one law for the rich and another for the poor. A king, being human can commit wrong things but the proverb under analysis represents him as a superhuman being free from all mortal flaws. Fairclough, (2012) maintains in order to decode discourses one needs to have an awareness of normative and Marxist perspectives related to language. This perpetuates the idea that the status of king is equivalent to god and whatever decision the king makes, the masses are bound to follow it without any objection. This places the masses in a subordinate position establishing hierarchies based on power in the society. This idea has also been used in order to gain control in the colonized countries. Language is used as an insidious weapon to exercise power and to make people behave in a desired manner. This can be undone by creating awareness and critical-mindedness among the masses by employing linguistic moves tactfully. The analysis of the proverb reveals that the concept of superordination and sub-ordination based on power inequality has been plaid up among the masses.

Table 3

S. No	Urdu Proverbs in the Second Category
1	Chota moo, bari bat
2	Jahan jy bhooka, whin pry sookha
3	Ghareeb ny rozy rkhy, din bary ay
4	Badan pr nhi latta, pan khyn albatta
5	Bandha khoob mar khata hai
6	Bheek k tukry, bazaar me Dakar
7	Adhi k toon ko jaun, lao meri palki

The proverbs in the second category promote marginalization based on social class. It represents the derogatory behavior and remarks associated with the people belonging to the lower section of society. The proverb selected for analysis is "Chota moo, bari bat" (literal translation: "Smallmouth, big words"). The metaphorical style of the proverb reduces the whole section of society to a least significant and incapable position. This suggests that the ability to give opinions and make great decisions is dependent on the prestige and social position of an individual and the poor cannot be expected to utter words of wisdom. Social power dynamics, hierarchies at the workplace, discouragement of subordinate voices, and the internalized inferiority complex are significant obstacles highlighted in the proverb. The concept of power imbalance is obvious which connotes the concept of might is right. It implies stereotypical social norms and setups that a wealthy man can only utter words of wisdom. The poor class has been belittled linguistically. This sports Marx's stance that the economy shapes and raptures our ideology and worldview. This can be avoided by encouraging equality in the dialogue that is achieved by equal opportunities and educational awareness. Moreover, a deeper cultural critique to empower individuals and promote inclusivity can help in removing this obstacle. However, it is obvious that language is a product of a society and reflects prevailing socio-political tendencies of a particular context for a particular time span.



Table 3

S. No	English proverb in Second Category
1	Beggars can't be choosers
2	A hungry man is an angry man
3	Set a beggar on horseback and he'll ride to the devil
4	When poverty comes in at the door, love flies out of the window
5	If wishes were horses, beggars would ride
6	The weakest go to the wall

The above-mentioned category of English proverbs shows mockery based on lower economic status. The economy is one of the leading factors that decide a person's position in social settings. Most proverbs in this category do not consider a poor man worthy of any social respect and associate negative traits such as being angry and ill-natured with him. The proverb "Beggars can't be choosers" reflects the attitude of society towards the people who are dependent or in need. The use of the metaphor of 'beggars' reflects a social stigma towards them and legitimizes the deprivation of their rights through language. The obstacles to addressing this issue are deep-rooted and can be observed in the economic structures of English society. The degradation of the poor has been institutionalized since the 16th century in the medieval ages and continued until date in the form of capitalism. Capitalism supports those who excel in the race to make money and degrades those who stay behind. In this proverb, beggars can also serve as the connotation for these poor people who do not deserve to select anything according to their will. The social order demands this unequal and derogatory treatment because it serves the interests of the ruling elite, capitalists, and authoritarians. The possible way to undo this is to reshape the mindset and remove this inferiority complex instilled through language. Moreover, better policy implications and creating equal opportunities for everyone can help in removing this social stigmatization and inequality.

Table 4

S. No	Urdu Proverbs in the Third Category
1	Kahan raja bhoj or kahan ganga taili
2	So sunar ki aik lohar ki
3	Zat ki bulae brabar bethy, kam zat ki bulae neechy bethy
4	Churi kharboozy pr giry ya kharbooya churi pr, nuqsan hmesha kharboozy ka hi hoga
5	Bibi khata kry, bandi pakri jy
6	Aik ko dy rutba aali, aik ko dy khurpa jali
7	Khin ki eent, khin ka rora, bhan matti ny kunba jora
8	Aapka nokar hn, kuch baingano ka nokar nahi
9	Ay mair bhagy bair

Fairclough, (2012) opines that language mirrors social reality, comparison between classes, and societal attitudes towards different classes. The proverb "Zat ki bulae brabar bethy, kam zat ki bulae neechy bethy" is selected for analysis. The lexical choices of 'zat' and 'kam zat' refer to the hierarchical social divisions because of caste. It shows the contrast between the treatment of people belonging to different classes. The sentence structure shows parallelism in addressing the higher and lower class in the first and second half of the sentence respectively. It shows the social practice of stratification and segregation through the seating positions of people belonging to higher vs. lower class. Language embodies the culture and norms of a particular context. Similarly, it is obvious from the analysis of the linguistic moves in the selected proverbs that the cultural traditions in South Asia mostly (mis)represent the poor classes in this region. One of the possible reasons for such representation could be that powerful people have ruled this region for ages. In the traditional rural settings, this stratification is promoted through feudalism. It is used to maintain the social order, particularly in the rural settings where the 'Saiths' (rich men) exploit the masses by creating differences and segregation among castes. These class distinctions are meant to control the orders of power dynamics. These are ultimately responsible for keeping them dominant and serving their power goals. This social wrong can be avoided by disseminating alternative discursive as well as social practices. In this regard, it is pertinent to mention here that promoting unbiased language towards different economic and social classes and shifting comparison on the basis of inherent qualities instead of superficial entities like money or caste can help in mitigating this norm.

Table 5

S. No	English Proverbs in Third Category
1	Better to live one day as a tiger than a thousand years as a sheep
2	A cat may look at a king
3	A mouse may help a lion
4	When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman
5	When elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers
6	One law for the rich, another for the poor
7	Little thieves are hanged but the great ones escape
8	It is ill sitting in Rome, and striving with the Pope

Fairclough, (2012) affirms that language is a product of a society and reflects its dominant tendencies. Similarly, this category contains the proverbs showing comparison among social classes based on position in the society and material status. The proverb “Little thieves are hanged but the great ones escape” is selected for analysis through the lens of Fairclough's critical social analysis. The juxtaposition in the lexical choices of little, great, and hanged, escape shows the dual standards of social practices and social order. The proverb implies that there are contradictions in the justice system and no set standard is available. The inherent nature of the crime is bad and not a debate in this proverb instead the actual debate is the treatment received by the criminal depending upon its social status. If the ill-doer is financially strong or has connections with people belonging to the high class, then he can escape the consequences. This proverb serves as a critique of societal norms as well as perpetuates the idea of acceptance of injustice by means of language. The social order does not need the social wrong because it is legitimizing the crimes for the greater thieves but the irony of the situation is that the social wrong is benefitting the people in power. It is used to exploit the lower and marginalized class against which the crime is committed. This social wrong can be avoided with the help of reformative actions that ensure justice for everyone irrespective of their social class. The analysis of the proverbs based on their linguistic features connotes that a strong system of accountability can be effective in bringing justice and equality into society. Moreover, it is also suggested that counter-public discourses can also help in challenging this narrative.

However, some of the proverbs in the third category show the narrative of equality such as “When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman.” This implies that at the advent of humanity, everyone was of equal status and there were no social divisions. Some of the proverbs challenge the narrative of inequality and prejudice on the basis of social status. The examples include “A cat may look at a king” and “A mouse may help a lion.”

Comparative Analysis of Urdu and English Proverbs

The analysis of Urdu and English proverbs illustrates that the inclination and prejudice of both the languages towards higher social class. However, there are certain changes in the approach of these languages which is reflected through the language of proverbs.

Urdu proverbs depict the social discrimination majorly on the basis of position in the society. The idea of social stratification is adopted from the culture which is particularly due to deep-rooted feudalism in South-Asia and monarchy in the sub-continent. The comparative analysis proverbs reveals the inevitability of these stereotypes and reinforce them through discourses.

English proverbs also show the social stratification, which is more associated with the economic status. This concept is deeply rooted in the capitalistic standards of the society. The proverbs associated with the discrimination because of social status can be traced back to the colonial era, which led discourses on power dynamics. However, in English proverbs there is a space for challenging these societal structures and discursive practices.

Findings and Discussions

The findings of the study reveal that Urdu and English proverbs related to social class reflect derogatory cultural and social trends in terms of representing the powerless negatively. It is also observed that Urdu proverbs show more discrimination on the basis of higher position and respectable caste in society while the English proverbs also show biases towards respectable positions but are comparatively more inclined



towards material status and wealth. In contrast, it is also observed that Urdu Proverbs show strict social stratification and do not challenge the social order. On the other hand, English proverbs also reinforce social stratification but the element of critique and contradictory views towards power dynamics has also been observed in the present study.

Conclusion

The present study concludes that proverbs mirror social norms prevalent in a particular society and are considered cultural artifacts of a society. The critical social analysis of proverbs of Urdu and English languages associated with social class helps in challenging the existing social norms. These proverbs reflect the hidden ideologies and uncover the power dynamics constructed by society in order to sustain the social order and achieve its controlling agenda. Besides, it maintains that the strength of the dialectical relationship between the discursive and social practices of vital importance. Proverbial discourses embody in them socio-political tendencies of their respective contexts.

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