

# Hamid Ahmad Khan Of Pakistani Linguistics

—Professor Anwar S. Dil

Hamid Ahmad Khan (1903-74), well-known for his distinguished contributions to Pakistani education and literature, was a language scholar whose active involvement in the sociolinguistic affairs of his country assure him a prominent place among Pakistani linguists.

Born in an eminent literary family of Wazirabad, Panjab, he was educated at the local Church of Scotland High School where he came in contact with the famous British linguist Grahame Bailey whose studies in Panjabi language, in particular, inspired Hamid Ahmad Khan (somehow he was generally called by his full name) by awakening his interest in studying language as a socio-cultural phenomenon and in learning a language well. Bailey had learnt Panjabi with such facility and distinction that it must have inspired Hamid Ahmad Khan to learn English with equal competence. For Urdu he had his elder brother Maulana Zafar Ali Khan, a brilliant poet and orator, as a challenging model. In his time Hamid Ahmad Khan acquired an enviable command over Panjabi, Urdu and English, a good knowledge of Classical Persian and Classical Arabic, besides a working knowledge of a number of languages and dialects of the sub-continent. For his bachelor's degree he went to Osmania University (Hyderabad, Deccan) where his love for Urdu received new stimulus in a literary and cultural climate in which the cultivation and promotion of Urdu language was highly valued. For his master's degree in English language and literature he studied at the Government College, Lahore, where he was introduced to phonetics and social dimensions of language behavior by J. R. Firth. Later he earned an M. Litt. degree from Cambridge University.

Hamid Ahmad Khan started his teaching career at Islamia College, Lahore, in 1934, and in course of time became known as one of the most distinguished teachers and scholars of English in the province. His love for Urdu language and literature was expressed through his active participation in literary organizations, his founding the Bāzm-e-Farogh-e Urdu (Society for the Promotion of Urdu), and contributing essays in literary journals such as *Humayun*, *Makhzan*, and *Adabi*

*Dunya*. He was an active member of a distinguished group of writers and promoters of Urdu language, including, among others, Mian Bashir Ahmad, Maulana Salah-ud-din Ahmad, Syed Muhammad Abdullah, Justice S. A. Rahman, Hakim Ahmad Shuja, and his brothers Professor Mahmud Ahmad Khan and Maulana Hamid Ali Khan.

It would be no exaggeration to say that he was associated with almost all the language committees and boards dealing with the development of Urdu as the national language of Pakistani, e.g., the Central Board for the Development of Urdu, the Official Language Committee, the Urdu Academy, the Anjuman Tarraqi-e-Urdu.

While Hamid Ahmad Khan recognized the importance of linguistic studies and research per se, his own interest in this field was limited to seeking a scientific basis for what he called "the inherent unity" of various languages and speech varieties in Pakistan for the overall purpose of achieving a national cohesion in the newly carved nation-state in search of its identity. He was quite convinced that Urdu was the only medium for such national purposes but he was also aware of the complexity of problems involved in meeting the challenge of developing such a role for Urdu in Pakistan. He favored a policy of developing closer contact and exchange between Urdu and Pashto, Sindhi, Baluchi and other languages spoken in Pakistan; upgrading the role of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish as the languages of Pakistan's literary and cultural traditions and Islamic heritage; and adopting a bold approach to English and other international languages for wider communication and modern-scientific and technological development. He believed that a pragmatic language policy for Pakistan's progress must reconcile the respective claims of these elements, and through this approach he aspired to bridge "the historical gap between our classical culture and the new learning"

His determined support for a change-over to naskh script for Urdu was part of this overall policy. He was opposed to the introduction of Roman script for Pakistani languages but saw no reason why Urdu and Punjabi nastaliq script should not be changed to naskh which could then become the standard for all Pakistani languages. I remember his enthusiastic response to Fathollah Mojtabai's presentation at the Second Pakistan Conference of Linguists describing the change-over from Persian nastaliq to naskh resulting in remarkable progress in literacy and reading among Iranian students. Hamid Ahmad Khan in his comments on Mojtabai's recommendation that such a change was over-due in Pakistan, said: "I cannot over-emphasize and cannot really give enough praise to what Mr. Mojtabai said about the desirability of a change in orthographical

methods in West Pakistan. As a matter of fact, apart from the scientific efficacy of that move, some of the regional languages are already using naskh. It is only unfortunate that Urdu prefers nastaliq. Pashto and Sindhi are written in naskh and there is no reason why Urdu and Panjabi should not change to the other script. There are good scientific grounds for doing so." (1964)

Hamid Ahmad Khan's commitment to the language problems of Pakistan is shown in his paper on the common structural basis of Urdu and Panjabi, presented to the First Pakistan Conference of Linguists (December 1962) and his presidential remarks at the symposium on the development of linguistic studies and research in Pakistan (January 1964). He believed that scientific knowledge and techniques should be "as purposefully applied to the study of language as to other departments of nation-building activity", and in his paper made a call for this approach to be applied to all languages of Pakistan to show the basic linguistic unity of the country despite its apparent diversity. He saw two basic elements underlying this unity: "the ancient native substratum of Indo-Aryan origin, and the neo-cultural superstructure of Arabic and Persian." To illustrate the "surprising degree of homogeneity" between Urdu and Panjabi he pointed out the remarkable continuum of Panjabi dialects from Rawalpindi to Ambala and from there southeastward to Saharanpur and Delhi a rising gradation of Urdu elements. Referring to a study of the process of reduplication by Iftikhar Ahmad (1962) who had noted close resemblance between Panjabi and Urdu as far as the syntactic behavior of reduplicates is concerned, Hamid Ahmad Khan proposed that similar investigations of rules governing tense, gender, and number, for example, would show remarkable similarities between the two languages. In this context he made references to Hafiz Mahmud Shirani's classic thesis that Urdu originated in the Panjabi-and Sindhi-speaking areas and Pandit Dattatarya Kaifi's claim that the lexical content of Waris Shah's *Heer* is in essence the same as that of early 19th Century Urdu. But he did not challenge Sir George Grierson's and Masud Husain Khan's view that Urdu and Panjabi, in their origin, are two different languages, and carefully concluded his argument thus: "Whatever may be the correct historical position, the fact remains that Old Urdu reads surprisingly like Panjabi."

In his 1964 presentation, however, he made a more categorical observation that Urdu and Panjabi were structurally one language up to the 14th century and that the bifurcation came in the 15th century and that an historical study of the structural development of Pakistani languages will establish this viewpoint. In this context he made another interesting remark that Urdu is "an India-based language" and "ultimately we do not want in this country to have India-based languages." He challenged the Pakistani language scholars to

consider how it could be done without causing a break in the tradition. What was really intended by these remarks was to highlight the problem of standard language and prestige norm of Urdu speech and writing in Pakistan that has continued to be Delhi, Lucknow or Hyderabad Deccan varieties. It was a call for scientific investigations in the process of language standardization in Urdu (and other Pakistani languages) for purposes of identifying features of Standard Pakistani Urdu. I am aware that these remarks were the subject of several critical comments especially among some Indian and Western scholars but it must be said in all fairness that Hamid Ahmad Khan's point was not understood in its proper context. But then he was at times misunderstood even by his close associates. For example, during the Urdu Conference in February 1959 when he tried to work for a settlement between the supporters of Urdu and the regional languages, Mian Bashir Ahmad of *Humayun* confronted him with the quip: "Et tu, Brutus." Interestingly, this anecdote was narrated by Hamid Ahmad Khan himself in his last published talk. (Dawn, April 6, 1974.)

In his presidential remarks at the symposium on the development of linguistic studies and research that was held as part of the Second Pakistan Conference of Linguists (January 1964) he discussed at length the Language Unit established in 1958 at University of the Panjab. Hamid Ahmad Khan was closely associated with its establishment and development plans. The Unit was projected as a pilot experiment to establish linguistic programs in Pakistan. In spite of the fact that at least three eminent British and American linguists had full-time appointments with the project and some interesting research studies were initiated, no serious effort was made by the Unit to integrate itself as a Pakistani undertaking. The Unit had to be wound up in 1962 and it must be said here that it was a serious blow to the development of linguistic programs in Pakistan. Hamid Ahmad Khan, for whom it was like a shattering of a bright hope, summed up the problems that led to the failure of the Language Unit in these words: "Somehow the Language Unit so withdrew its activities into itself that, apart from the immediate neighbours of this department inside the university, people outside did not know much of what was happening and naturally enough, did not derive much benefit either. Also difficulty arose, I think, because most of the work was concentrated upon the teaching of English and the techniques of teaching English were not extended to the teaching of national and regional languages. Had we started work on the languages of this area, Panjabi, Sindhi, Pashto and Urdu, perhaps the work of the Language Unit could have proved more fruitful."

After he became Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Panjab in 1963, Hamid Ahmad Khan made several attempts to establish a linguistics program at Lahore. He appointed a Committee on Linguistics to look into the matter. I

recall participating in the first, and perhaps the only meeting of this committee. One of the items on the agenda was the discussion of my proposal for a certificate and diploma course in linguistics in collaboration with different language departments of the university. Vice-Chancellor Hamid Ahmad Khan wanted very much to establish a research-oriented university department of linguistics and as he discussed some of his plans with me on a number of occasions it might have been possible but for the lack of support among his colleagues and agencies such as the Ford Foundation and the British Council, mainly because of their unfortunate experience with the Language Unit.

As Vice-Chancellor, Hamid Ahmad Khan had the satisfaction of successfully sponsoring such prestigious literary projects as the Cultural and Literary History of the Muslims of the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent and the Majlis-e Yadgar-e Ghalib (The Ghalib Memorial Society). One of his contributions could have been the establishment of linguistic teaching, training, and research programs at Pakistani universities coordinated by the Inter-Varsities Board or some other central organization to ensure a solid supportive base for scientific research on Pakistani languages and language policy planning. Those who knew him must remember how he strove for over fifteen years to establish such a nucleus at the University of the Panjab. He aspired to make Lahore once again a great seat of linguistic studies it once was in the pre-independence days. This was one of his dreams that did not come true. But his efforts to establish the importance of an area of research so vital to discovering the elements of the national oneness of the Pakistani people, assure him a place in the history of Pakistani linguistics.

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