

How to Fix a Script: British Colonialism and the Sindhi Writing System

Matthew A. Cook, North Carolina Central University

In 1856 the East India Company declared that the Khudabadi script would *not* be the writing system for the Sindhi language. Instead, it pronounced that an Arabic-style script was to be used for Sindhi. Prior to this pronouncement, Sindhi speakers from different communities wrote their language in a variety of scripts. This paper examines the debate and socio-cultural ramifications of the Company selecting and fixing an Arabic-style script over Khudabadi. It combines multiple fields of inquiry (e.g., history, anthropology and linguistics) to explore questions about how language under-wrote colonial dominance in, what is today, the key world region of Pakistan. Rather than examine scripts as forms (i.e., orthography), the paper focuses on how writing systems were discursive strategies for the establishment and maintenance of colonial power. It also analyzes the history of the Sindhi language to illustrate how the Company displaced and codified writing systems to construct a more singular Sindhi identity.

Presenting this paper contributes to my academic/professional experience in multiple ways. First, I have never presented this research in Pakistan. This research and its arguments will be greatly enhanced by opening first-time conversations with Pakistani scholars. Second, I generally present my research in Karachi rather than Islamabad. Presenting this paper at a workshop in Islamabad will enhance my academic/professional experience by significantly expanding my professional network within Pakistan.

This paper contributes to the field of Pakistan Studies by combining anthropology, history and linguistics to explore questions about how language under-wrote imperial dominance in, what is today, a key world region. The paper focuses on the colonial history of the Sindhi script as a map that delineates how old socio-cultural identities were displaced to produce new linguistic paths for the construction of a distinctive modern Sindhi identity. The research poses answers to the questions: How did the British change the Sindhi writing system and what impact did these changes subsequently have on everyday life in Pakistan? How do these changes' history further a more general and comparative understanding of the relationship between script politics and governance?