To Romanize or not to Romanize?: Pashto language, social media and the global viability

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Abstract

Spoken language is one of the primary identity markers of an individual and/or a group. Language and its use demonstrate one's ethnicity, profession, academic background, and social class among other identity markers. However, sometimes a contestation of sorts arises between the established spoken language and the written script especially when the written script is Romanized. Nowadays the Pashto script is popularly Romanized mainly when used as a medium of communication for short message service (SMS) and/or for responding on social media. This paper explores the evolution of Pashto script to understand the prospects of a language when the standard language is spoken but its written form is Romanized. In order to understand this contention I first establish how far informally Romanizing the Pashto script has popularized (or not) the usage of Pashto. Secondly, using Collier and Ong's (2005) concept of 'global assemblages' I demonstrate the role of globalization in influencing the use of Romanized Pashto script. Thirdly, I explore the future of the Pashto script in terms of keeping the authentic language 'alive.' Finally, I conclude by stating that as we live in a globalized world therefore Romanizing a script can be a reason, a requirement, and perhaps an easily accessible way to keep not only a language but a culture alive locally, nationally, and internationally.

Keywords: Pashto script, globalization, global assemblages, Romanizing, social media, SMS

Spoken language is one of the primary identity markers of an individual and/or a group. Language and its use demonstrate one's ethnicity, profession, academic background, and social class among other identity markers. However, sometimes a contestation of sorts arises between the established spoken language and the written script especially when the written script is Romanized. Nowadays the Pashto script is popularly Romanized mainly when used as a medium of communication for short messaging service (SMS) and/or for responding on social media. This paper explores the growth of Pashto script to understand the prospects of the language when the standard

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language is spoken but its written form is Romanized. In other words, this paper seeks answers to: what is the future of the written Pashto script if we Romanize it in short text messages and on social media like Facebook, Twitter, etc. Who does it and why do they do it? Why do we not use the Pashto script instead of Romanizing? And finally, what is the future of Pashto language: should we go on Romanizing and let Pashto script go to oblivion? In order to find answers to these questions I first establish how far informally Romanizing the Pashto script has popularized or not the usage of Pashto. Secondly, using Collier and Ong's (2005) concept of 'global assemblages' I demonstrate the role of globalization in influencing the use of Romanized Pashto script. Thirdly, I explore the future of the Pashto script in terms of how can the authentic language be kept 'alive' in face global influences. Finally, I conclude by stating that as we live in a globalized world therefore Romanizing a script can be a reason, a requirement, and perhaps an easily accessible way to keep not only a language but a culture alive locally, nationally, and internationally.

Romanizing: Pros and Cons

Earlier attempts at Romanizing languages have been a part of history. For most part the effort was to officially Romanize certain languages. In attempts to Romanize the Hebrew script Aytürk, (2007) is of the opinion that "Roman alphabet was the alphabet of the 'other' for the non-Catholic Christians as well as the Muslims, Jews and other Asian peoples. In other words, the borders of alphabets neatly overlapped with the borders of civilizations" (p. 626).

In conjunction, Wood (1929) much earlier on said, regarding the Latinizing or Romanizing of the Turkish alphabet that nationalism and westernization are agonistic and conflicting phenomenon but at times adjustments have to be made like retaining certain Turkish customs and at the same time to adopting certain western ideas and methods (p. 195).

However, Aytürk, (2010) commenting on the Romanization of Hebrew and Turkish is of the opinion that most of the world languages today use the non-Roman alphabet or script like, but not limited to, the *Devanagari* script in India, the *han'gŭl* in Korea, the *kanji* and *kana* in Japan, the *hànzì* in China, the Arabic alphabet in most of the Muslim world, the Greek alphabet in Greece, the Cyrillic in Russia, and the square letters in Israel. This not only restricts the expansion of the Roman alphabet but also mars the high expectations associated with at the beginning of the twentieth century (p. 98).

And Penzl (1961) almost half a century ago draws an interesting parallel of how Western loanwords in Modern Pashto were used and are still used by native speakers. The English loan words in Pashto both when spoken

and particularly when written come across as Romanized form of Pashto. Penzl (1961) says:

> One of the most interesting lexical problems in the modern languages of Asia is the influence of western culture and modern technology on the vocabulary…. The names of many foreign countries (amrika-America; aastria-Austria; german-Germany; kanada-Canada; tailaind; Thailand), of Western measures, weights, and months (keelo-kilogram;sunti-centimeter; lumber-number; junwari- January; ferweri-February; mai-may; situmbar-september etc.) are loanwords. We find among them terms for European clothing, food, objects (bout-boot; putloon-pantaloon/pants; fashun-fashion; buks/bakas-box; botal-bottle; poder-powder etc); political, commercial, and administrative terms (assumbli-assembly; kantrol-control; narmal-normal; paleecy-policy; program-program' afsar-officer; etc.); scientific and technological vocabulary (atum-atom;bum-bomb;), particularly in the field of motor transport (luber-rubber; tayer-tyre;); terms in medicine and education (dakter-doctor; etc.), culture and sport (ger-gear; injin-engine; brik-brake; tesan-station; laysns-license; kultur-culture; radiyo-radio;rikat-record;sinema-cinema; etc.) (pp. 43-45).

As such, Weinreich (2010) aptly points out how and why native speakers of a language decide to use, that is, speak and write, their respective languages and consequently decide on language shift. He is of the opinion that socio-cultural practices; educational levels; religious affiliations; and settlement patterns of the speakers of a language affect their general outlook on life, value systems and beliefs. It is on the basis of these life experiences that the speakers decide to bring about a shift in their mother tongues; choose to continue using their mother tongue or move on to another language, especially a language that is more dominant (pp. 44-45).

In order to understand the Romanizing of Pashto language it is important to understand the role of globalization and its effects. In this paper, I follow Collier and Ong's (2005) the explanation of globalization. They believe that global phenomena are produced as a result of social and cultural challenges. Global forms appropriate themselves to new environments; diverse contexts and objects in a way that they can be apparently regulated and controlled by the circuits of power. In addition, these 'Global forms are limited or delimited by specific technical infrastructures, administrative apparatuses, or value regimes, not by the vagaries of a social or cultural field '(p. 11). In

other words, Collier and Ong are of the opinion that globalization is a multi-faceted, two-way process; globalization affects the locals and is in turn is affected by the locals as well.

In conjunction, Appadurai (1996) also believes that globalization does not mean homogenization of a culture or people. Instead globalization uses the tools of homogenization like advertising, linguistic control, fashion styles etc. that are absorbed by the local political and cultural economies. Interestingly, these tools only to appear to be heterogeneous, compared to the local trends but they tacitly influence the local people and mold them into adopting the global forms thus producing a (new) homogeneity of sorts.

In addition, Appadurai (2001) somewhat resonates Collier and Ong's (2005) claim when he states that globalization is actually the flow of a range of things: objects, persons, images, and discourses. All these may not have much in common; in fact they are in disjuncture but the only commonality is that they are the products of globalization. And it is globalization that manifests or 'assembles' them in the local forms even though the local contexts may be very different.

Collier and Ong (2005) explain that globalization works through an all-inclusive approach; it does not support the global-local divide. According to Collier and Ong (2005), these global forms circulate in assemblages either separately or in a multilayered combination of science, technology, value systems etc. and hence produces new materials, discursive practices and relationships. The global assemblages also become the sites for formation and re-formation of technological, political and ethical reflections and interventions (Collier and Ong 2005, p. 4). However, these global assemblages also suggest inherent tensions. Yet, it is precisely when the global assemblages, in a certain territory, come into contact with the local context and people, among other things, the nexus of globalization and language is formed. As such, in this paper when I used the term terrorialization I mean the process as explicated by Collier and Ong (2005) which is the engagement of global assemblages with the local culture and its effect on the local people, their discursive practices, linguistic patterns and the overall way of everyday life. Interestingly, "glocalization" used by Berry et el (2003, p. 7) means almost the same; they too think that globalization is the local appropriation of global mobile technologies and discourse (p. 13).

Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature and I employ the purposive sampling technique. In order to understand the reason for popularly Romanizing Pashto especially in Short Message Service (SMS) and during

social media interaction. I purposively selected a sample of respondents who included students and faculty from the departments of English and Pashto, at a local University in Peshawar. The respondents in both these groups were residents of different areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; were native speakers of Pashto; used technological devices and media; and mostly Romanized the Pashto script in SMS and on social media. The students from both the departments included Post Graduate level students. However, the faculty from both the departments comprised a mix of both relatively young and senior faculty members. The reason I chose university faculty and students, as opposed to respondents generally, is that they are either specialists or specializing in the respective languages and are informed users.

I sought answers to five simple questions:

1. When texting or positing on social media what language do they use?
2. Do the social media users Romanize Pashto or use the original script?
3. Why?
4. If the social media users are using Romanized Pashto where does it leave the actual script? Or if they are using pure Pashto is it benefitting the language in any way?
5. Why is this happening?

In this paper to clarify my point I use some verbatim responses of the respondents and in order to maintain anonymity I use pseudonyms for the respondents.

To Romanize or not to Romanize? That is the Question!

At the Department of Pashto**,** a mid-career Pashto faculty member, Shandana, explained that she uses two languages: English and Pashto; no Urdu at all. She uses English with her officers and seniors; or anyone in her (professional) social circle. With her sisters and close friends she uses Romanized Pashto for texting. She explained, "I can't write the Pashto script using the mobile! No! No! I don't know how to do that! When a person wants to express some sort of emotions whether, anger, love, hatred; or whatever emotions s/he uses the mother tongue; it will be in Pashto." Shandana also believed that the Romanization of Pashto language is only limited to its use in the social media. She emphatically added, "We have not reached that stage where we are writing our books in the Romanized version." She continued to state that she thought that most of us are lazy; influenced by English due colonizing; the cultural war propagated through media; the idea of globalized village; all are responsible for the Romanized use of Pashto in social media. She was confident that the original Pashto script is not endangered and with

the passage of time Pashto and it experts are working on making it as technology-friendly as possible.

A senior faculty, Professor Asadullah, believed that the Romanized Pashto is due to our education system for instance if our children were taught the Pashto script in schools this problem would not have occurred. He believed that we are challenged with the problem of multi-script system. For example in SMS we use Romanized Pashto as English characters take lesser space compared to the Arabic alphabet and so saves time also. Besides, the English language has a better effect on the sender and the receiver.

Another senior Professor at the Pashto Department, Saifullah said that he used Romanized Pashto. He was of the opinion that the reason we do not use the Pashto script in SMS etc. is because most people do not know how to use the Pashto keyboard; even he did not know. However, he believed that people need to learn how to use the Pashto keyboard to be able to write the Pashto script. He added that there is another reason also: let us suppose that one person uses the Pashto script but every receiver, for instance, may not be able to read or have interest in Pashto and as a result s/he may totally ignore the sender's message. But anyone who understands Pashto can read the Romanized version. However, he also said, "There is no doubt that using Romanized Pashto is a threat for the Pashto script."

Here it is quite interesting to note that the former respondent, a female professor of Pashto is okay with Romanized Pashto usage in the social media as long as the printed written script is safe. But the male professor shows a little angst at the Romanized script usage even if it is in sending and receiving SMS. The contesting views show that an internal contradiction may arise and it will be noteworthy to see how it is negotiated and resolved, if at all.

While I was interviewing Dr. Saifullah, a young student cum Pashto Department faculty member from another University of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa also joined us. Though much younger to my previous two respondents, he was very clear about not using the Romanized Pashto for any sort of communication. He said that he used all forms of social media and he used the Pashto language not in Roman but in Pashto script. He explained that all those windows that came after 2007 have the Pashto software and keyboards. And there are softwares that have all the characters required for writing the Pashto script. Even Android mobiles mostly have provision to write Pashto script and besides some simple mobiles also have provisions for writing the Arabic script. He believed using Romanized version is the corruption of the original script because we are neither using correct English nor using correct Pashto. It is a mix; the only thing is that it is an easy way out though it badly damages the original script. He added, "Personally, I am not in favor of using the

Romanized version of Pashto. Now there are technological provisions available, the only problem is our people don't want to understand or learn the usage." And he continued explaining that the main reason is that Pashto is not part of our academic syllabus and our public school graduates have become used to using English and more so English typing thus they use Romanized Pashto. They only need to get used to typing Pashto like those of us who have become used to using the Pashto script and do not use the Romanized version at all. He said, "From SMS, to Facebook statuses, to academic PowerPoint presentations I use the Pashto script."

Again here, a male Pashto student emphasizes the use of original Pashto script while communicating through various social networking mediums.

In conjunction with the faculty at the University in Peshawar, a Pashto MPhil student told me that he usually used Romanize Pashto for texting or sending SMS; in fact on all social media he used the Romanized script. He explained that he does not use Pashto script because most mobiles do not have that as an option and using the Urdu script makes it difficult because the alphabets are different than Pashto. However, he added, "But I would definitely want that good Pashto script software is developed and used widely." He admitted that on Facebook he used English as he did not have Pashto or Urdu software in his laptop. His reason was, "most of my friends prefer using English or at the most Romanized Pashto. This is because our syllabi are mostly in English that is why most of us use English script and besides using English is also symbolic of status."

While talking to the faculty and the students of Pashto language it was rather apparent that they used Romanized Pashto script for communicating through the social media platforms but most of them preferred that Pashto script be used as much as possible. However, one of the respondents also admitted that "English is symbolic of [social] status" almost echoing Rahman (2002), "Pashto speakers still cannot aspire to positions of power in Pakistan without learning Urdu or English" (p. 15).

After the Pashto Department faculty and students I interviewed faculty and students at the Department of English to find out what their views would be as one language is a means to their livelihood while the other is a part of their ethnic and cultural identity. And since the faculty and students at the English departments tend to use English more I wondered if they would support Romanized Pashto more than the Pashto department's faculty and students. However, following are some of the responses that I got. Amid-career faculty, Dr. Majid, told me that he texted in English or Romanized Pashto. He explicated that there are different reasons for using different

scripts, for example, it depends on who he is texting. If the person knows English then he kept the conversation in English. But if the person does not understand English then he used Pashto in the Romanized form. In addition, he also added, "but there are other reasons for it as well: if I want to convey certain emotions which I think I can't do in English then I use Pashto. For example, if I text my wife it is mostly Pashto with a mix of English. If I text a friend and I want to and for some cultural expression I use Pashto." Dr. Majid believed that Romanization has affected English; he had noticed that when people text him back their spellings have deteriorated or become weaker. Yet, he added, "Some people use Romanized Pashto because quite a number of us do not know how to write the Pashto script as we have never been [officially] taught Pashto."

For me it was interesting to note that Dr. Majid, being a faulty of the English Department, was more concerned about the deterioration of the English script, grammar, and spellings compared to the Pashto script becoming extinct because of the Romanized Pashto usage in SMS and social media.

Another English faculty member, Faisal explained that on social media he normally switched between English and Pashto. He said that whenever he has to express some feelings and thinks he cannot do justice to them in English he switches to (Romanized) Pashto. Faisal clarified, "These are usually very personal feelings; personal feelings are conveyed better in the mother tongue, you know!" and Faisal had a different take on Romanization, "Besides, I think when we Romanize Pashto it will enrich English language more and Pashto words will find their way into the English language."

Faisal also narrated that he taught history of English Literature and Drama at the Masters Level and functional and business English at the undergraduate level. Recently, he came across more than 270 students at different departments. One day he asked each class to tell him how many of them could write Pashto. And to his surprise among all those 270 students only 4 told him that they could write Pashto; and the rest could not. According to Faisal the reason is that all of these students are trained and educated in the modern private school systems. As such, Faisal claimed, "Now if we still keep on clinging to Pashto script we will be losing our new generation and as a result of that they might not get to know the cultural nuances that we are able to discuss now. They may not even know how to write or read the Pashto script. So it may be better if we Romanize Pashto."

A student, Sadia, at the English Department said, "For me it's English mostly on texting and WhatsApp; completely English. With my brothers it's mostly Pashto; it's Romanized Pashto. Romanized because I can't write the

Pashto script and it takes a lot of time to write in Pashto script. It's easier to write in English because we are used to that."

And another student, Humaira added, "When I post serious statuses on Facebook it's in English but with friends it's Romanized Pashto. Most of us use the Romanized Pashto because we are not taught Pashto in schools. We would have used the Pashto script if we had learned it in schools."

It is quite apparent that the faculty and students at the English Department, compared to the Pashto Department, are more comfortable with using the Romanized Pashto, especially with family and they are even more comfortable with using English as a medium of communication with friends and while discussing serious issues on social networking sites.

Discussion

It is apparent that most the respondents be they from the department of Pashto or English tend to Romanize the Pashto script. However, some respondents from the Pashto Department feel that Romanizing is affecting the Pashto script and in fact for SMS and social media the Pashto script should not be used. Otherwise, it can lead to the extinction of the actual script. But the respondents at the English Department and one at Pashto Department also, believed that Pashto script should be used and that Romanizing does not all together damage the language or the script. Both groups of respondents were of the opinion that firstly, even now many technological devices do not have software for Pashto language and more importantly most of the Pakhtun users do not know how to write the Pashto script primarily due their academic training which is more focused on English as medium of instruction and learning; they are a product of an English medium education system. While others, as some of the respondents pointed out, find it easier to use the English key board even if they are not well versed in the language itself. In other words, Romanizing of Pashto, particularly for the purpose of SMS and other social media usage, is primarily due to our colonial legacy topped with global influences. As such, we have become terrotorialized subjects. As Collier and Ong (2005) explicate that the process of "territorialization" starts when the said assemblages, in any combination, enter a site or location, they are bound to engage with it and it is here that the nexus of globalization, language, and in this case Romanization of Pashto script takes place. According to Collier and Ong (2005, p. 4) that global forms always travel is assemblages, hence, 'global assemblages' that is, in a combination of techno science, system of administration, governance, system of ethics and values. These forms or assemblages circulate either individually or collectively in the global territories and contexts. They further add that these global assemblages are

sites for formation and reformation of technological, political and ethical reflection and intervention (Collier and Ong, 2005, p. 4).

Therefore, "territorialization" is the process that initiates when global assemblages, in our case English language and technology, enter and engage with the local site(s), that is, the Pashto speakers, are bound to influence the people, their subjectivities, their language, and technological usage. As a result of territorialization, Pashto is Romanized for technologically modern communication purposes. The reason most of the respondents are comfortable with Romanizing Pashto is because they collectively believe that, in Pakistan English is seen more as a mindset; indicating a social class and indigenous languages are considered to portray more of a rural mindset and thus considered as languages that do not add value to the urban personae. Therefore, some believe that informally Romanizing the script cannot really harm the original script of Pashto; though the software for Pashto script are available and can be further developed for common usage. Besides, a respondent, Faisal said that if we keep on clinging to Pashto script we will be losing our new generation and as a result of that they might not get to know the cultural ways and values which they are able to discuss now. As such, he was of the opinion that although the younger generation may not even know how to write or read the Pashto script but to retain the cultural nuances it may be better if they or even we Romanize Pashto. What Faisal has said is an apt example of territorialization of global assemblages, that is, the local adoption of global mobile technologies and discourse. However, Collier and Ong (2005) explicitly also point out that, "The term "globalassemblage" suggests inherent tensions: global implies broadly encompassing, seamless, and mobile; assemblage implies heterogeneous, contingent, unstable, partial, and situated" (p. 12). Therefore, it is not surprising that the respondents are divided and have conflicting opinions about Romanizing the Pashto script for technological and social media usage.

Conclusion

I got answers to the questions that I mentioned earlier in the paper. The respondents did tell me what language they used while texting or posting on social media. They also told me if they used the original Pashto script or Romanized Pashto; and why they used that particular form. However, the challenge was to resolve the last two questions: If the social media users are using Romanized Pashto where does it leave the actual script? Or if they are using pure Pashto is it benefitting the language in any way? And why is this happening?

While looking at the respondents' answers it does become a little challenging to decide whether "to Romanize or not to Romanize" the Pashto

script. But at the same time it is understandable why most of the Pashto language faculty and scholars do not want to Romanize the Pashto script: for them as speakers of and researchers in Pashto language it is important not to lose the Pashto script. But in fact develop the language and modern technological applications and gadgets to take the original language script forward academically and otherwise. However, those respondents who support Romanizing the Pashto script also have a point: they think that the people, especially the younger generation, is more prone to using technology as it is and therefore they rather learn and practice the technological language format in vogue, understood by many. The young users do socially and personally communicate in Pashto but in Romanized Pashto; they think it is culturally legit to propagate the language even if it is not the original script. As we live in a globalized world, consequently, it is not surprising to Romanize the Pashto script; it can be a reason, a requirement, and perhaps an easily accessible way to keep not only a language but a culture alive locally, nationally, and internationally.

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