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## Interdisciplinary Study in Criminology and Sociolinguistics: Impact of Jail Environment on Teenagers Linguistic Expression

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**Abstract:** *Beyond the sphere of freedom, a whole new layer of subculture thrives within prison walls in most countries, which is often neglected. This research focuses on identifying the language attitudes among prisoners and their impact on youth incarcerated there. The study is based on conversational analysis techniques, and the research framework is established on the emblem of both the behaviourist and interactionist approaches in linguistic cognition. Also, it offers a unique opportunity to bring together the disciplines of sociolinguistics, behavioural studies and criminology. The target audience is highly specific as it comprises individuals directly exposed to jails. A semi-structured interview was conducted from the participants. This study finds that insulting and abusive linguistic expressions are largely practiced in Jail Systems which cause deteriorating harm to the well-being and social development of young individuals imprisoned there.*

**Key Words:** Critical Discourse Analysis, Impact on Teenagers, Negative Linguistic Environment, Prison Argot, Prisons in Pakistan, Well-being

### Introduction

Communication is a universal phenomenon of meanings, giving, receiving and sharing information between individuals through common signs, symbols or behaviour. It is generally referred to as the process of communication. Good communication demonstrates who says what to whom with what effect. (Laswell, 1948). It is a dynamic phenomenon as communication occurs when one mind influences the other through its action upon the environment by creating a similar experience in the other mind (Brownlee, Wiley, & Richard, 1969). Six factors determine linguistic function during any communication (addresser, message, context, channel, code, and receiver); these factors suggest that message, intention, and meaning cannot be isolated from the context (Jacobson, 1960). Human communication is unique in its approach as it is

pivoted on the use of language, a highly sophisticated variable that interacts with every aspect of life in a society. Sociolinguistics is the descriptive study of the effects of these societal aspects on language. It analyses how language varieties and their adherence to certain rules diversify between groups and sets standards for categorizing individuals in social classes. Thus, sociolinguistics deals with the level where language and setting interact (Eastman, 1975). The phenomenon of communication is present in all human situations and scenarios and is studied in all disciplines of social sciences, including criminology.

Criminology is the scientific study of illegal aspects of crime and delinquency. It emphasizes their causes, betterment and eradication through the lenses of multiple disciplines, such as sociology, linguistics, and anthropology. In simple terms, it is the study of offence, a punishable violation against

morality that harms both the state and society and deviant behaviour in multiple and diverse dimensions. Sociolinguistics and criminology share the common ground in this study as both cover socio-cultural human dimensions.

The language spoken by a community serves its socio-cultural index (Moshe, Dagan, Einat, & Tomer, 2019). The setting and context of this study are prisons. Jails and their administration in Pakistan are a provincial competency under the country's constitution. Standard jail institutions in Pakistan are Central Jails, District Jails and Sub Jails. Other types include Women's Jails, Borstal Schools, and Open and Special Jails. Currently, 99 of them are operational (Warrach, 2016). According to reports, prisons in Pakistan lack proper infrastructure and are heavily populated, understaffed and poorly managed. Thus, the malfunctioned system is a breeding ground for crime and militancy.

The recurrence of criminal behaviour and activities among prisoners is more likely than their abandonment. The prison system lacks a programmatic approach toward the capacity building of its staff. Weak accountability mechanisms, lack of rationality, torture and brutal treatment are rampant in Jails in Pakistan. The cultural preferences in the Pakistani Jail system protect the powerful while victimizing the underprivileged; outdated laws and procedures are still in practice there, individuals suffer long detentions without trial, and no distinction is practised while dealing with minor and major crimes or criminals. Many inmates are awaiting trial and are not yet accused or proven guilty of their charges; they are still forced to stay imprisoned as they cannot afford bail. The list of issues goes on and on, but our target here are teenagers, young offenders and minors. In contravention of the Juvenile Justice System Ordinance, children are arrested for critical violations and illegally detained for indefinite periods. Then, in the absence of adequate facilities and their interaction with hardcore criminals, they tend to get inclined toward grave crimes and offences. It has been suggested that socialization among prisoners can curb the rise in their criminality and, thereby, encourage their reoffending.

Abysmal living conditions, drug abuse, violence, threats and use of insulting statements and foul language are the epicentre of the whole system, which is largely turning the prisoners, especially

youth and children, into solidified lawbreakers rather than refined nationals of the state. The Prison System is a significant connectivity point between the citizen and the state, yet, Pakistani Jails do not come in alliance with international standards and norms issued.

## Literature Review

The transition period between childhood and adulthood is 13-19. The ones in this age group are equipped with rapid mental and physical development. This era of teenage, thus, is a critical phase in an individual's life. Exposure to any tragic or traumatic event or unhealthy setting could cast life-lasting impacts on their personalities. According to Differential Association Theory, an individual's lowkey potential to engage in criminal activities and behaviour is exacerbated by socializing with people with such history, identity and skills as they supplement their own (Sutherland, 1947). Common learning processes such as modelling, reinforcement, punishment, and dialogue contribute to the acquisition, and behavioural change (Sutherland, 1947; Skinner, 1953; Bandura, 1962; Burgess, Akers, 1966; Dishion, Dodge, 2005; Akers, 2009) and this peer influence operating through the processes mentioned above generate the outcomes that keep on impacting the individual for many years to come after (Dishion et al., 2010). It is quite alarming if such an age group faces the pains and pangs of imprisonment.

Despite the insufferable pain of imprisonment, prisoners interact, socialize, cooperate and organize (Tomer Einat, 2006). Language plays a pivotal role in this regard. Linguistic variety spoken within the prison environment differs largely from that of the outer world and, comparatively, is more intense and violent. Linguistically the variety spoken in prisons is termed as Prison Argot.

The linguistic expressions used by the prisoners mirror their emotions, anxieties, viewpoints and attitudes. To manifest the prison culture, one must interpret the language used inside those cold walls and understand what it means to its users. Inmates live, think and function within the framework of the argot (Bondesson, 1989). The prison argot is generally comprised of the codes for drugs, violent phrases, Nicknames for police officers, and bad

names referred to staff or inmates. Inmate code forms the core of culture shared by prisoners and paves the way for its developers to gain power and status within the crime world, and thereby, to some extent, it does alleviate their sense of social rejection, loss of liberty and security (Skyles & Messenger, 1960). If a social scientist intends to reach out to the intense issues teenage prisoners face, the best way is to focus on their language, linguistic expressions and communication patterns.

Although the grammatical structure of prison argot is almost similar to the greater standard dialect of the language, the vocabulary is what distinguishes it (Ciechanowska, Anna, Kleparski, & Andrzej, 2015). Prison argot is largely a spoken linguistic variety (Ciechanowska, Anna, Kleparski, & Andrzej, 2015). It is a dynamic entity as it evolves and shows variations across different regions and institutions (Dziedzic-Rawska & Alicja, 2018). The words that form the spinal cord of prison argot signify the objects integral to life there (Harris, Nakamura, Bucklen, & Bret, 2017). It seems to represent the collective and functional stance of inmates to cope with the environment they are exposed to (Einat, 2000) and an escape route from their physical and psychological pain caused by impoverishment, bleak living conditions, confusion, existential crises, instability, boredom and anxiety over future (Kruttschnitt & Gartner, 2004). Hence, the diversity in resources and dialects and the needs and interests of users shape the inventory list of the prison lingua.

Across the globe, more than 1 million children are behind bars (UNICEF, 2016). The World Health Organization, in its 2013 style guide, emphasizes that language must not discriminate against, stereotype, or demean people based on age, physical or intellectual impairments, ethnicity, gender, sex or sexual orientation (Geneva, WHO; 2013). Language is vital to life as it is the means of interaction, regulation, expression, and gaining control over ones feelings and behaviours (Moxem, Jones, & Helland, 2021). The age variable is considerably more effective when discussing the peer influence or impact of the prison environment than that of social and education. As education, social status and age decrease, prisoners are more influenced by the prison language and, thus, tend to integrate more semantic processes in their speech from inmate argot.

## **Aim and Objectives**

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For this research, the tensional points of departure are the contextual analysis of causation, administration and conditions of personality development, and linguistic concerns that contribute to the system, control and rehabilitation. The basic notion underlying this research is simple. It aims to:

1. Investigate the linguistic attitudes among prison populations and provide a rigorous insight into how teenagers, juveniles or young offenders perceive the prison argot.
2. Analyze what impact such exposure could have on them in the short and long run.
3. Elevate these critical yet neglected concerns, raise awareness and provide suitable suggestions/solutions.
4. Challenge and adapt stigma-free linguistic expressions.

The study highlights how to prioritize individuals over their characteristics, prefer respectful language without discrimination, and reduce harm and suffering from exposure to problematic terms and phrases.

## **Significance**

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This research challenges and addresses the impact of language in the context of incarceration and systematic abuse in Jail Systems. Prison is a ruthless assault on the soul, slow and painful degradation of self and an experience of day-to-day oppression. The very state of imprisonment is based on the power relation between the keeper and the kept (Cox, 2020). Although much research and emphasis on prison reforms, power relations and Critical Discourse Analysis of the language of incarceration are present in the literature and studies, relatively few or none are specified on its impact on young offenders. The prison environment is structured on cultural hegemony and individual habits of mind rather than sociological context; thus, it is a failed social system (Mayr, 2003). In Jail systems, objectification is often accepted as the commonsense natural order. It is the major source of the formation of an inventory list of prison argots, developed for self-expression, to maintain interpersonal relations and create a social ordering system in prison.

Language shapes peoples views. Thus, it can affect the incarcerated youth and either brace or

sabotage their personality and identity. Exposure to a negative linguistic environment can consequently lead to perceived internalized stigma. Words matter, and the terms or language used in most Jail systems worldwide are often derogatory, stigmatizing and dehumanizing. This study is significant as it is designed to study the impact of exposure to such linguistic expressions on young individuals' well-being after prison.

### Scope

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The linguistic variety spoken by prisoners is sometimes so different from the one used outside the prison walls that it is almost unfathomable for those who have never been exposed to it. This variety is idiosyncratic in terms of phonology, morphology and semantics. The study of prison language and its relevant words and expressions is of great significance from sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic, cognitive-linguistic and criminology points of view (MasnAbadi, Rahbar, & Oroji, 2018). Thus, this offers a unique opportunity to combine the theory, description and application and argues with broader disciplinary concerns.

This study has a high scope as it aims to protect human and child rights in general and raise public awareness. It also tends to trigger policy formulating institutions for initiating developmental, control and rehabilitation reforms, addressing communication inequalities and cultural/social isolation. A way will be paved to make prison language policies comprehensive and provide solutions to the issues related to linguistic expressions in practice there. It will also give a unique and thought-provoking dimension to researchers in the field and better the futures of many.

### Limitations

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There are explicit and implicit coercion risks while researching prison systems (Abott, DiGiacomo, & Hu, 2018). The major hindrances during this research include barriers to data access due to the system's confidentiality policies. Data collection was problematic because staff and inmates largely held back and hesitated while sharing the facts and their experiences of prison life. Gender also played a limiting factor while conducting this research; as for the females, the Jail systems and their environment

are unsafe for visitation and interaction due to several ethical and practical complexities.

### Research Questions

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- a. How do we categorize the linguistic expressions used in the Jails in Pakistan?
- b. How do the teenagers/young offenders perceive the language of others in jail?
- c. How does the prison environment impact the communication skills of teenagers?
- d. How does exposure to the environment alter the linguistic expressions of teenagers/young offenders in jail?

### Research Design

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This research is descriptive and comprises a systematic take on responses from the target audience. A mixed-method analytic approach was used to extract results. The analytical framework of our study was established by finding recurrent themes in the responses given by the participants. This study is based on an elaborated function that conversational analysis can have within the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis. CDA regards discourse as a form of social practice (Sameen, Farid, & Hussain, 2021). It explores concealed power relations in society in-depth and aims to extract practically implacable results (Fairclough, Mulderigg, & Wodak, 1997). On the other hand, our research's theoretical framework deals with an amalgam of Behaviorist and Interactionist approaches. Both qualitative and quantitative analyses were run on the interview responses for accurate interpretation. This study is both interpretative and explanatory and holds practical significance o

### Instrument

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A semi-structured interview was formulated and conducted as a fundamental tool used in this research to gather responses from individuals revolving around their personal life experiences within and after prison. The interviews were conducted online through WhatsApp chats and phone calls. Close-ended statements/questions were used in the interview, assuring affirmative/single-word answers. However, optional open-ended questions were also asked, with the research objective of seeking

suggestions for the betterment of the system and reaching a satisfactory conclusion.

### Sample

The interview was electronically conducted with four undergraduate students currently enrolled in renowned public and private universities of Pakistan (i.e. LUMS, Punjab University) but have been imprisoned for a period ranging from a few months to 2 to 3 years during their teenage for some criminal offence. Also, two interviews were conducted with the staff members serving in the Jail Systems of Pakistan at present, on designations allotted by the very Government of the state. The respondents were cautiously targeted and specifically sampled. A limited number of responses were collected to reduce the probability of error to its minimum. Our sample, however, was not narrowed down to a certain region; rather, responses were gathered from youth imprisoned (in the past) in different districts.

### Data Analysis

Multiple close-ended and a few subjective questions (optional) were inquired by the participants. The summary of this is as follows:

The statement whether the jail system in Pakistan is in alliance with international standards rendered a negative response by all. When asked, are the jails in Pakistan poorly managed, lack the systematic approach, are understaffed, unhygienic and torturous?" the majority confirmed with a simple Yes. The target youth told us how they were victimized, abused and maltreated in jails. Unfortunately, prisons do not serve the purpose they should, as no rehabilitation routines or facilities are in place in the system. The majority also said "Yes" when asked whether their meetups and calls with family were watched and tapped? This highlighted the aspect of incarcerated juveniles becoming distant from their beloved ones and facing communication barriers in the longer run. They told us that they faced hindrances in interaction and socializing even after their release from prison due to the constant fear of being under observation. Does the staff use slang in their conversations?" this question was responded to with a Yes by 5 out of 6 participants. When asked, "Whether the officers take care of language while dealing with teenagers?" the response was divided, as juveniles confirmed this; however, the staff largely negated it.

A few questions were intended to discover the lifestyle of individuals after their release from jail. Did the prison life impact your receptive and expressive skills? Do you sound desperate while talking normally? , All the individuals responded with a Yes to these queries. However, as they were enrolled in higher education now, they also stated that the support of their beloved ones had helped them a great deal to adapt to positive linguistic expressions, discarding most of what they have learnt in prisons throughout.

A whole new prison argot came to our attention as juveniles shared the code words commonly used inside the jails to refer to staff, drugs or fellow prisoners. Offensive terminologies serve as a hallmark to maintain hierarchy, fear and victimize the weaker people in jails. Higher mafias or rich people mostly bail themselves out; even if not, they enjoy certain liberties inside the prison walls, whereas poor and less influential people continue to suffer. The fact that participants were hesitant toward answering specific questions and skipped them, i.e. Could you name any curse words or slang used to address you or your family in the jail? gives us an idea about the amount of fear, insecurities, and trauma develop, that even after years of freedom they are not ready to come forward and speak for themselves.

### Findings

Our most emphatic concern that insulting and abusive linguistic expressions are largely practised with teenagers in the Jail systems was proved valid in the reflective responses to close-ended questions from the sample. Responses gathered from participants on major premises of this study are illustrated in the figures below:

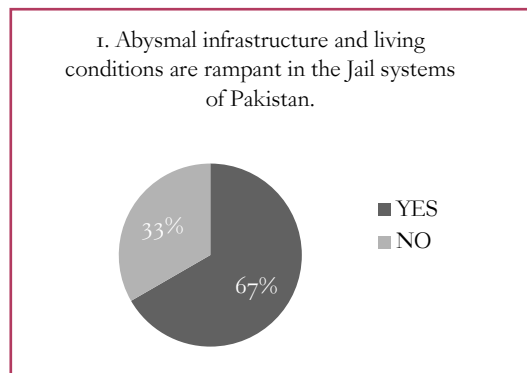


Figure 1

The teeming majority of 67% have confirmed that jails do more harms than good due to criminal negligence on the part of administration to bring reforms in the misled ones. There is glaring negligence and lack of mindfulness among the state agents about their roles and responsibilities in this regard. It also highlights the lack of proper in-service and pre-service training of the jail staff who fail to provide the proper infrastructure and living conditions to make the youth be the healthy contributors in the society after making a mistake which brings them to jail.

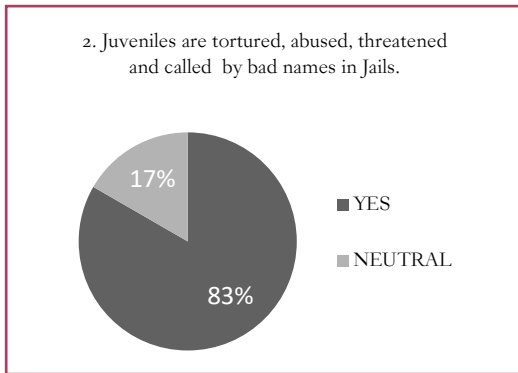


Figure 2

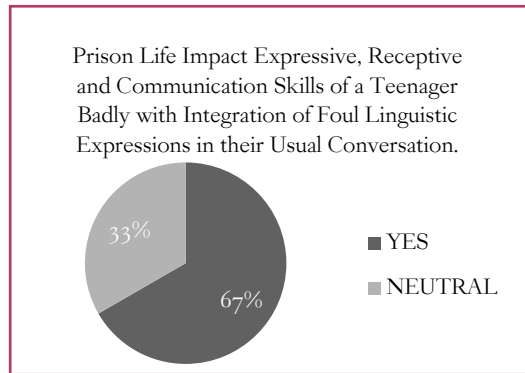


Figure 4

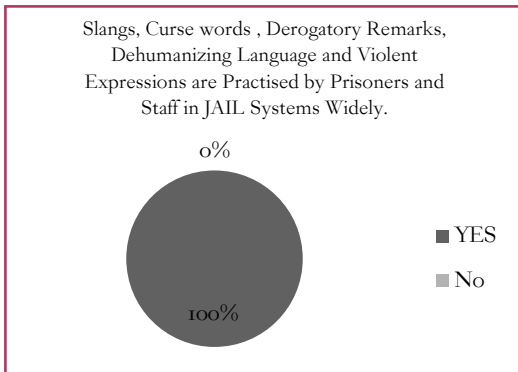


Figure 3

Language shapes our worldviews; therefore, young minds exposed to negative linguistic environments are at great risk of developing that way. Not only do they become prey to depression, anxiety disorders, suicidal thoughts and crimes, but it also deteriorates their bonding and relationships. They face

hindrances while communicating their personal and social needs because of the guilt and shame associated with them, or at least they feel so. The insecurities internalize with time and lead to emotional regression. Moreover, young minds are exposed to coded conversations inside the jails, which impact their receptive and interpretative skills. They live in consistent doubts and are even unable to comprehend simple statements properly, as they keep looking for hidden meanings; this is the major reason why sometimes a small joke in family gatherings or social circles is enough to trigger or offend them beyond measure.

The responses gathered from participants have confirmed that prison systems in Pakistan are not per the International Standards of infrastructure and moral norms. Staff do not treat juveniles with caution and continuously expose them to harsh living conditions and adverse linguistic attitudes. They are abused, insulted and called bad names for themselves and their beloved ones. They are not addressed with care and are exposed to violent expressions in this crucial age of transition and psychological, physical and social development. They learn a lot about illegal activities and substances through prison argot. Consequently, this imposes grave alterations to their personality, communication skills and social life for even a lifetime.

### Conclusion

To sum up, this paper is based on the critical evaluation of the linguistic environment in Jail Systems and its impact on teenagers imprisoned there. UN rules listed regarding the protection of

Juveniles state that children (in prisons) should be provided with

- An infrastructure designed for rehabilitation, keeping in view their needs for privacy and sensory stimuli
- opportunities to collaborate with peers and to partake in sports and healthy activities
- A right to education and to attain vocational training during the period of detention suited to their needs, abilities and interests to prepare them for future employment and a better life in the outer world.

Pakistan still needs to establish Juvenile institutions or come up with alternatives to what is postulated in its law. Many convicted children, teenagers and young offenders are held in prisons, sometimes in the same lockups as adults. In either circumstance, they are directly exposed to linguistic practices that can deteriorate their communication skills, socializing aptitude and language habits for a lifetime. After analyzing the linguistic choices made by individuals

in prison, this study evaluated its impact on youth exposed to it.

### **Recommendations**

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Some of the suggested solutions regarding the matter of concern are enlisted here:

1. The severance of minor offenders and suspects, specifically persuadable youth, from hardened criminals, must be done urgently.
2. Practising respectful and appropriate language is a fundamental way to reduce harmful impacts and suffering when operating with individuals subjected to the criminal justice system; derogatory, demeaning and dehumanizing linguistic expressions must halt (Tran, Baggio, Wolff, & al., [2018](#)).
3. Proper probation systems, regular training and accountability of parole officers and the establishment of rehabilitation institutes can largely diminish the negative influence of prison life on an individual.



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