

## **Impact of television content on language usage in the children of Pakistan.**

Dr. Sadia Mahmood & Dr. Uzma Parveen

### **Abstract:**

*Media and language have an undeniable connection to the lives of children. Their upbringing is shaped by what they watch and despite entering the digital age, TV is still the primary source for children today to consume media. The lack of localized content does not only result in cultural irrelevancy but also hinders language acquisition for these children, even when they watch educational programs. Whilst language development from TV is important, it is dwarfed in significance when compared to real life interaction especially from their sources of primary socialization i.e. parents. It can be concluded that cultivation theory is proven true along with the idea of the hypodermic syringe model to some extent. The hypodermic syringe model states that we consume media without any resistance to it. Children who cannot full interpret these media messages are the most viable contenders for the success of the hypodermic model. That is a live demonstration of TV impacting a child. This language usage may seem childish and temporary but actually manifests into the child forming their characteristics as adults.*

## **Introduction**

Cultivation is a function which is deeply rooted in our culture. We, with the collaboration of our various social institutions, are always cultivating new ideas, reinforcing old ones and trying to keep our culture intact. At the same we are accepting social change and sometimes resisting it too. The stories of a culture reflect and cultivate its most basic and fundamental assumptions, ideologies, and values. This culture forms media and is then, in the ultimate irony, in turn shaped by media. The cycle is ongoing and the one thing worth pinpointing is that human beings are fundamentally impacted by what they consume on their TV screens. The demographic that are profoundly shaped by the media are the children.

Visual and audio content on TV has been one of the primary sources of language acquisition for children since the 1960's and to this day. The language used in everyday programs such as news, morning shows, sitcoms and movies are, on one hand, reflections of the language used in real life whilst also being exaggerated in some cases and suppressed in others, and on the other hand some uncommon and iconic media texts can impact and change every day lingo. From Schwarzenegger in Terminator to Joey in Friends, examples of people adopting new words and phrases can be seen around the world.

Children, being the most vulnerable members of society, are like sponges, absorbing and deeply instating everything that is happening around them. That is the reason why children have been the core of most researches in social sciences. Story telling is mainly a business focusing solely on the children of any society. They are not just used for amusing children but also to inculcate cultural heritage, social norms and religious ideologies in them. What maybe merely entertainment for the day, can be what shapes their personality on a subconscious level for the long-term.

In the age of mass communication this task of cultural storytelling has been transformed into so much more. Television has taken over the role of many people which used to perform this task like mothers, grand parents, teachers or friends. It has taken storytelling to a much higher level where the control over content is minimal by other social institutions of the society. Story telling is now in the hands of marketing individuals who have something to sell. Each program that is directed towards the children today is backed up by some advertising party.

In Pakistan, this proves to be woven into another dilemma. We see a clear lack of locally created, designed and produced programs. For this reason only the children in Pakistan are being exposed to programs which are made in some other country with a completely different cultural setting. These programs include animated cartoons mainly but also have a sprinkling of films, sports events, music programs and talk shows. The very important point here is that these program are in languages which are not used in our cultural setting therefore are alien to the children here in Pakistan. Even though Hindi content such as Choota Bheem and Motu Patlu are in a similar language, they leave local children to feel culturally alienated when they don't see themselves being represented in the media.

For Pakistani children, great programming hasn't been developed in its history other than the golden era of Ainak Wala Jinn! We have also recently made strides with animated movies for kids such as 3 Bahadur, Burka Avengers the series and Allahyar and the legend of Markhor. Other than that there has been nothing but poor quality branded content with no purpose other than that of advancing product sales. Dettol Warriors and Knorr Boriyat Busters are two such examples. Even Allahyar and the legend of Markhor were laced with branded content to the point of annoyance. Commander Safeguard can be regarded the one animated short series that actually integrated the brand with decent storylines and a positive message. It is unfortunate that something like branded content is held in high esteem when it comes to

children's programming which is a testament to how little effort has been given towards developing content for kids. It's a pity because no one develops themselves watching TV/screen content more than children in their early development years.

### **Methodology**

This study is focusing mainly on how language is being cultivated in the children of Pakistan without having the correct understanding of the usage and implication of such language. A survey research was conducted with a sample of 50 mothers who had child or children between the ages of 6 to 10. This survey was conducted with educated middle class women whose children go to English medium schools so as to ascertain that the children are not altogether unfamiliar to the English language. The base of this study is made on the Cultivation theory of mass communication.

### **Cultivation Theory**

Gerbner's cultivation theory says that television has become the main source of storytelling in today's society. Those who watch four or more hours a day are labeled heavy television viewers and those who view less than four hours per day, according to Gerbner are light viewers. Heavy viewers are exposed to more violence and therefore are affected by the Mean World Syndrome, an idea that the world is worse than it actually is. According to Gerbner, the overuse of television is creating a homogeneous and fearful populace.

The cultivation theory is a scientific theory. The theory does not believe television viewers have a choice in whether they are affected by media violence or not. Lastly, Gerbner allows some of his own values to enter into the theory by deciding what to consider violence and by assigning a numerical value to heavy television viewing. Gerber's idea of the effects heavy television viewing is intriguing. There is definitely support to show that those who watch great amounts of television do experience the

mean world syndrome, the definition of 'heavy' needs to be reexamined. Gerbner defines heavy television viewing as watching four or more hours a day. The idea of setting a numerical value to try to equate heavy influence to a mass populace is suspect. While the theory does contain some holes it adequately opens the discussion dealing with effects of the media upon viewers.

The effects of Gerbner's mean world syndrome can easily be seen with older people. Many of them watch many hours of television per day without leaving their rooms to actually see what the real world is like. Having only the media to guide their interpretation of the 'real world', such residents believe that the world is a corrupt and violent place.

The important point here about cultivation theory is that it is installing and reinforcing ideas which are not in the general trends of the cultural web. Many, who are not even heavy viewers of the television as defined by the theory, are still under great impression and cultivate ideas within.

### **The Modern screen isn't just a TV**

These findings prove that TV is affecting our children, that is undisputed and the parents are aware of it! However, have there been appropriate boundaries and actions taken to limit or censor their usage? Nominal strides have been made, especially locally where all sorts of content can be penetrated through not only a TV screen but also digitally. After all, in today's world, the Internet has become one of the major sources of infotainment and for our children; it will surely be the primary source. All studies done throughout the world regarding TV, language, children and media psychology has been conducted in the context of TV and sure, the internet contains tons of TV content but it is so much more. From web series and YouTube channels to pornography and dark web, the internet can be an even more dangerous place for children

where censorship laws are blurred and anyone can watch anything simply by lying about their age!

### **Media Exposure for Language Usage**

According to the theory of Behaviorism, which believes that all actions and thought-process is formed by conditioning, the mind of an infant is an empty bucket which is molded to adapt to his or her environment. Noam Chomsky, one of the greatest thinkers of this generation, states that language is the child adapting to their surroundings. Chomsky, however, did not limit his findings to just being external. Innately speaking, he said that the brain has a language acquiring part which reaches peak performance at 12 years of age and then starts to decline. This emphasizes the significance language in early childhood development and how severe media's role in it really is! According to a study by Lingbarger and Walker in 2005, shows such as Blue's Clues were instrumental for language development in both babies and toddlers!

The impact of TV is immense but it all depends of context and the intricate details. The child's primary and secondary socialization which happens in the home and school/neighborhood respectively plays a vital role in their ingestion of TV content. From the spoken language and storyline to the actors (ethnicities and accents) involved. In a study by Linebarger and Vaala conducted in 2010, it was concluded that rhythmic linguistic format shows such as Dora the Explorer played a profound role in children learning new phrases and developing their long-term vocabulary. They also studied how cultural relevance and relate-ability in TV content was a great factor in it being consumed more enthusiastically both in terms of quantity and enjoyment! In the light of this study, the serious lack of local Pakistani content is troublesome to say the least. It's no surprise that channels such as Pogo and shows such as Choota Bheem are loved by small children due to their (slight) cultural and (strong) linguistic similarities when compared to their surroundings. This proved not only that Chomsky's theories are

correct but that Cultivation theory in context of language development in children stands valid! The basis of cultivation theory is that the language that's developed within the child at a young age manifests itself to their actual daily usage. Chomsky and others seem to agree that this indeed in the case. However, is TV programming one of the primary influences to a child's language usage? It certainly isn't the only one!

Mendelsohn et al. in 2010 found that verbal communication between young kids and their parents directly impacts their language development. Based on this hypothesis, children TV programs which break the fourth wall and communicate directly with the child (Dora the Explorer) are also developing the child's linguistic prowess. In contrast to this, an argument is made that exposing the child to TV programming also means that non-educational programs are also consumed which is directly associated with a decrease in parent-child communication and reading. Tomopoulos et al in 2010 disagreed that parental integration is essential and must form a marriage with the child's learning, to which, he argued, educational programming is an essential part of. Whilst TV programs may have an impact in language usage for children, it seems to be minimal at best when compared to an actual parent's communication. Indeed studies by Zimmerman et al in 2010 along with many others found out that vocabulary is learnable from TV but is only substantially effective when it's presented alongside a real life demonstration.

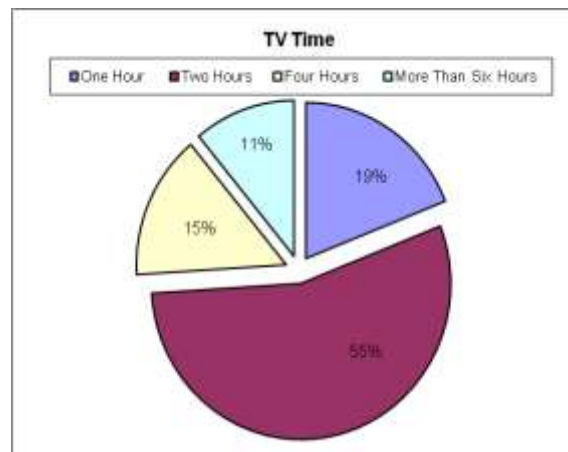
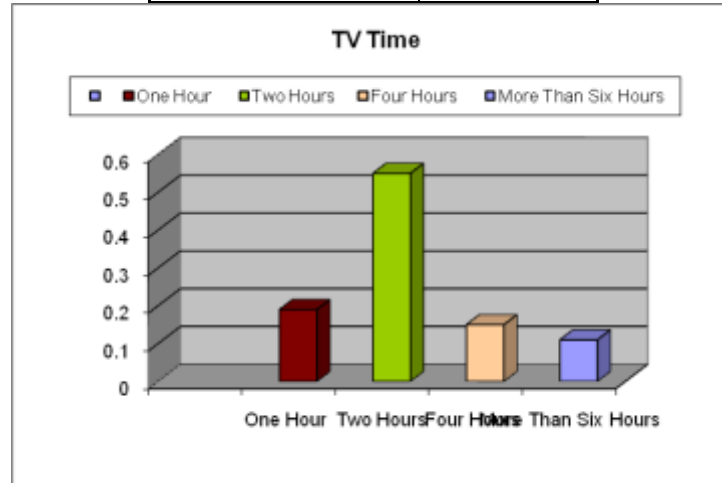
#### **Data Analysis:**

#### **How much TV does your child watch?**

One Hour	19%
Two Hours	55%
Four Hours	15%

More Than Six Hours
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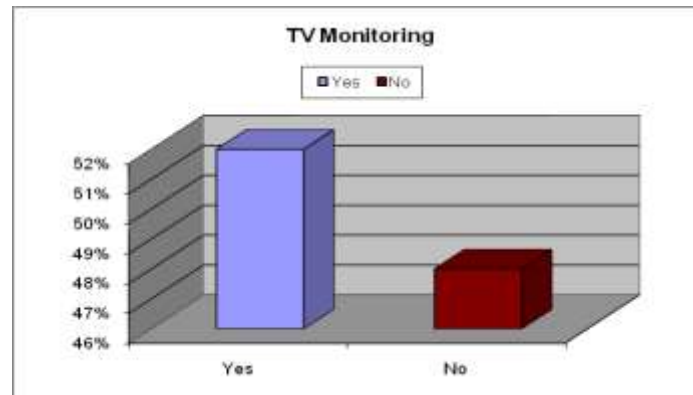
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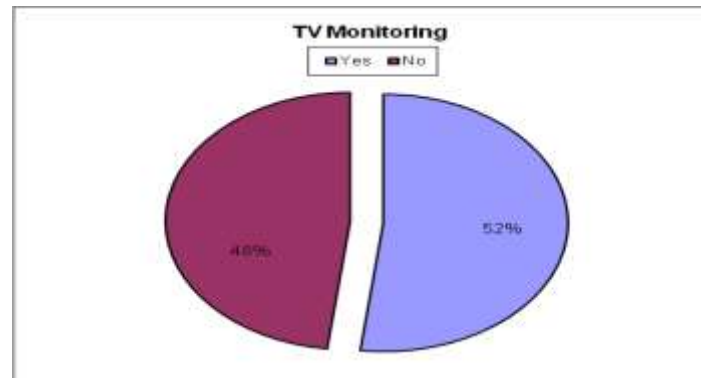


In this result we can clearly see that majority of the children do watch TV at least two hours a day. Where in vacations and other holidays are not accounted for. The exposure to this medium is evident to the entire sample. This number may seem to be a considerable account but in today's day and age where TV also comes in the shapes of smartphones and tablets, what is the actual screen time of our children? Not to mention, these are regular school days! Also, one of the concerns regarding this question can be the respondents trying to hide the unhealthy habits of their children by lying. There was obviously no polygraph test taken, so questionnaire results are always prone to this weakness.

### Do you monitor your child TV watching?

Yes	52%
No	48%

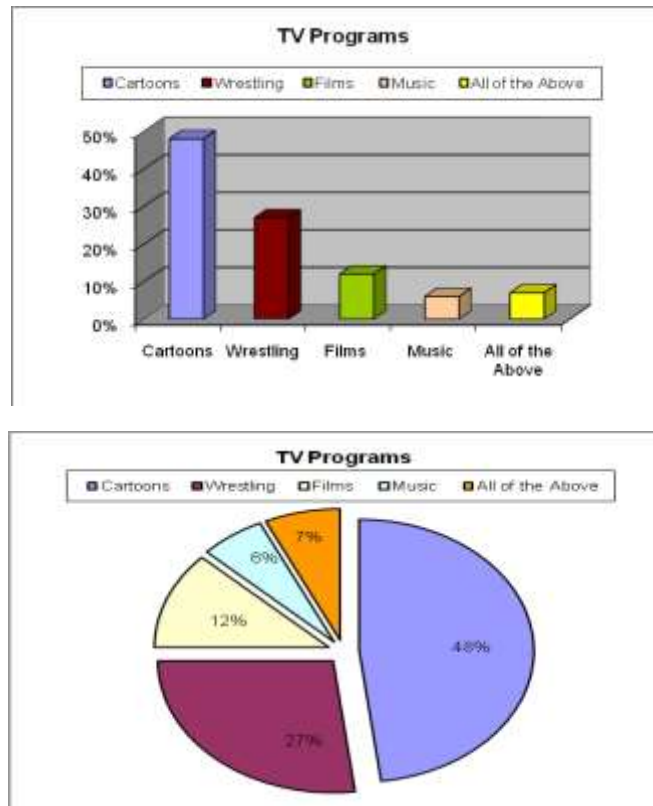




Though a majority is admitting to monitoring the TV viewing activity yet the difference is very less. We also do not know whether the monitoring is done with the explanation of the content and its language. This may mean that a major portion of children who are watching TV may not have any guidance as to what they are exposed to. Is the monitoring with the parent sitting next to their child and attentively consuming what their child is consuming in an effort to explain and discuss it with them in detail? Or is the 'monitoring' the child watching the program with the parent doing their office work on the side table?

**What kind of programs does your child watches?**

Cartoons	48%
Wrestling	27%
Films	12%
Music	6%
All of the Above	7%

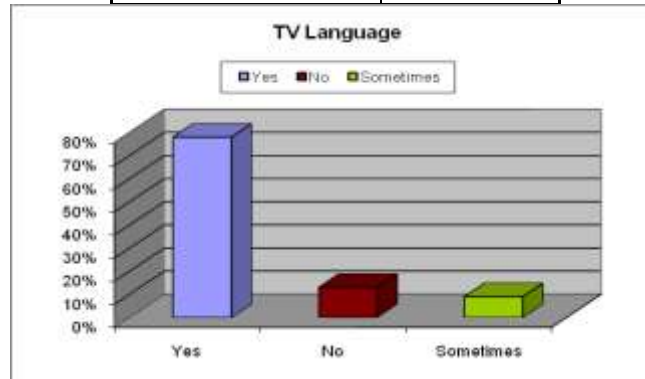


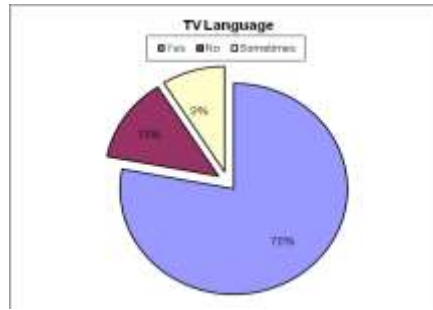
A clear preference of cartoons is evident, as it should be for children. The other major stock goes to wrestling which are rated PG for family friendly promotions such as WWE and rated 14+ for others. All sorts of wrestling is certainly not for little children as they do not only show athletes in skimpy clothes but broadcasts them in violence. We also know that the type of cartoons which are being shown on TV these days have a mix of violence (Ben 10, Dragon Ball) and obscenity (adult themes in cartoons such as Adventure Time). However, there is no doubt that cartoons such as Barney and Blue's Clues are actually quite beneficial for children to not only learn different things but also to develop their language (since the language used in these kids shows are fairly simple). The

question still arises, what happens to Pakistani children who are trying to develop their language usage with a primary focus on Urdu but hardly any Urdu content in the market. Even content that is subbed in Urdu/Hindi such as Doremon have no cultural relevance to Pakistan and so the feeling of being ‘the other’ is always omnipresent for Pakistani children consuming such content.

**Do you think that the language used in TV programs is in conflict with our cultural structure?**

Yes	78%
No	13%
Sometimes	9%

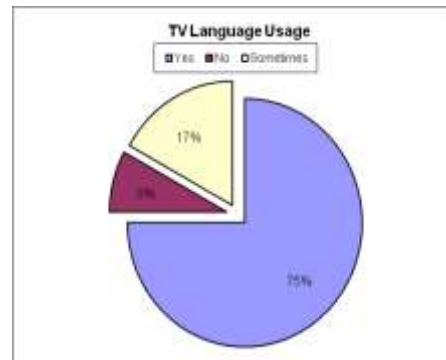
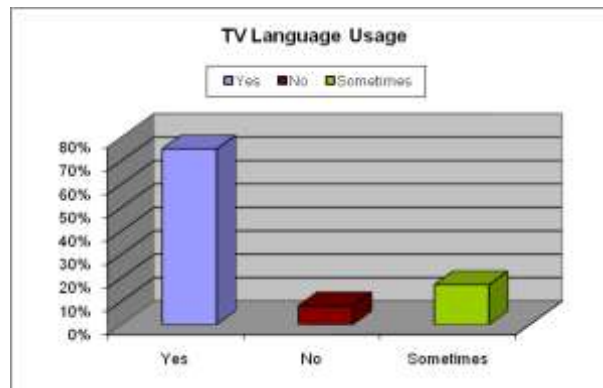




A clear indicator is present in this result, of the language being appraised as out of our cultural limits. A great part of our sample understands it to be of awkward sometimes if not all the time. A very small percentage thinks it to be of no consequence. How can producers, animators and writers brought up in countries such as USA, Japan and India relate to or write content for Pakistani children. The simple answer is that they cannot and our children are consuming TV media that is foreign to them both literally and figuratively.

**Does your child use the language which is used in these programs?**

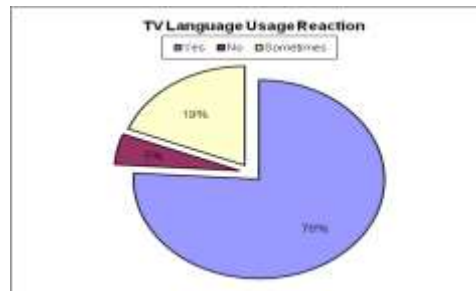
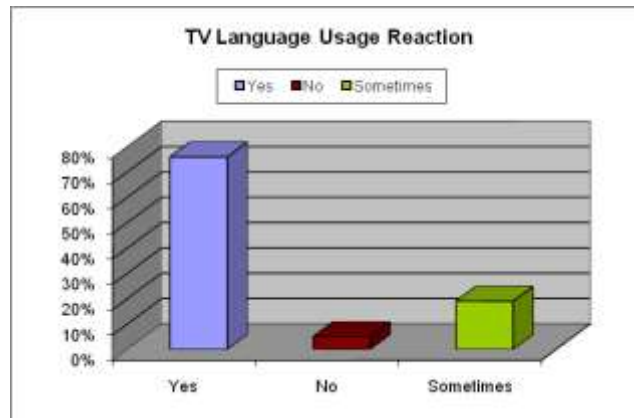
Yes	75%
No	8%
Sometimes	17%



Again in this result the absorption of language is quite evident. Children are using this language in their daily lives but not having the complete understanding of the words that they use. The kids who are using such language sometimes are also a significant percentage. With the emergence of social media, terms such as 'memes, hashtag, tweet and hella' among many others have become everyday lingo for children especially pre-teens.

**Do you correct your child when he/she uses the language with is in conflict with our cultural structure?**

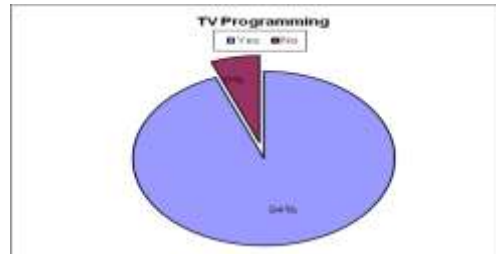
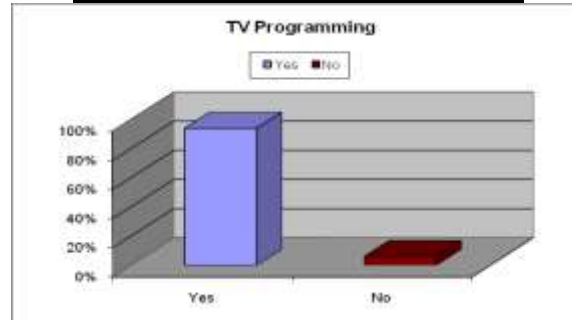
Yes	76%
No	5%
Sometimes	19%



We can see a pattern in all above three results. The children are using this language as cultivated in them by the exposure given to them by TV and there is a clear conflict where parents disapprove and also correct them. This indicates that TV is cultivating something in the children which is not in completely acceptable in their social system. Again, wouldn't the parents just be validating themselves by answering to me, an external party who has no real record of their daily lives that they are doing a proper job of being updated with what their child is watching and helping to provide a healthy environment for their learning and language development? Nobody likes to admit their wrongs that is a fact, and is one of the loopholes of studies like this by not just me but esteemed sociologists and scientists around the world!

**Do you think that the lack of our own children programming is the cause why kids are watching foreign programs?**

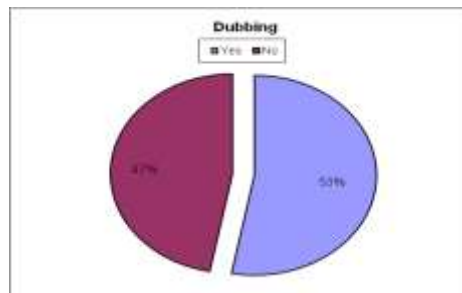
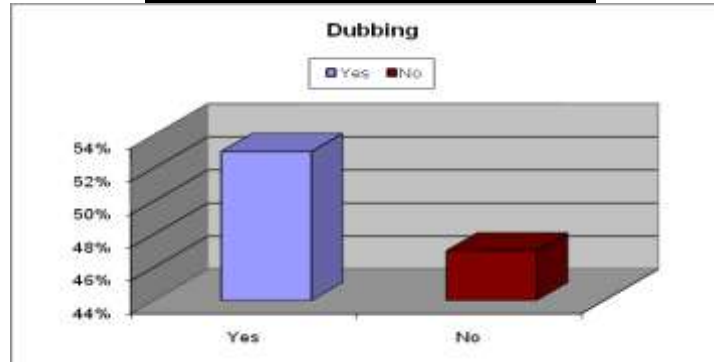
Yes	94%
No	6%



A very clear message is being given out by this result. A very clear majority of 94% agrees that Pakistani channels are not providing adequate programs for children. We have to pay more attention to children programming in Pakistan. This result is an indicator of the lack of proper children socialization by the TV channels in Pakistan.

**Do you think that these should be dubbed in our languages (national or regional) and then aired?**

Yes	53%
No	47%



Here we get a mixed result of whether these programs will be able to serve a better purpose if translated or dubbed in local languages. It may mean that the program content will still be improper according to culture. The other part of the result may suggest that at least the language issues could then be dealt with and some form of assimilation with the language will take place. While adopting local language is important, foreign content is still made within the context of their own culture.

A middle ground between parental interaction and TV programs can be sought after in children's theatre and puppet shows where

entertainment is the basis for learning and language acquisition through real life means. Don't get me wrong, the child is still the audience but it is certainly a better option than a screen.

Nowadays, digital interaction is more real life than ever before! From Alexa and Google Home's voice commands to children targeted mobile applications which require the sense of touch. There is no real research done regarding this New Media and how it helps shape a child's language usage. However, if we strictly stick to TV content, there are three major ways to break things down

- 1) Content
- 2) Context
- 3) Watch time

In Barr et al. study of 308 children conducted in 2010, he observed that new-age parents are least concerned about TV watch time out of these three. This is the result of the decreasing amount of free time that parents have who are, in many cases, handling extensive professional careers. Parents often use TV as a means of distraction rather than education. The ideal situation for optimal language development and usage is Parents limiting TV watch time so that they can watch the programs with their children, controlling the content to be high quality and educational and then discussing and interacting with their child within the context of the program. Of course, this is a laborious task and a compromise must be reached. Parents often seek this compromise to be in the form of schools i.e. secondary socialization. However, by the age that a child goes to school without strong primary socialization, they do not only feel left behind but due to their limited language usage they often feel alienated within groups and classes which may also lead to them being bullied. Of course, it depends on the child's personality and how quickly they grasp things but a strong linguistic background inside the house translates to a better

environment for further vocabulary development in the school. Some parents might even be delusional enough to think that the solution to this is sending their child early to schooling which, instead of aiding them hinders their growth by robbing them of essential primary development (a factor in damaged parent-child communication as well).

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, media and language have an undeniable connection to the lives of children. Their upbringing is shaped by what they watch and despite entering the digital age, TV is still the primary source for children today to consume media. The lack of localized content does not only result in cultural irrelevancy but also hinders language acquisition for these children, even when they watch educational programs. Whilst language development from TV is important, it is dwarfed in significance when compared to real life interaction especially from their sources of primary socialization i.e. parents. It can be concluded that cultivation theory is proven to stand true along with the idea of the hypodermic syringe model to some extent. The hypodermic syringe model states that we consume media without any resistance to it. Children who cannot full interpret these media messages are the most viable contenders for the success of the hypodermic model. These ideas from the TV cultivate in the child's mind to form the basis of language development and usage! Ever noticed a child copying their favorite actor? That is a live demonstration of TV impacting a child. This language usage may seem childish and temporary but actually manifests into the child forming their characteristics as adults. As far as this study goes, language usage in our children is without a doubt one of the products of TV consumption in children and this phenomenon can be clearly understood through the cultivation theory of psychology.

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