

## **Power of Linguistic Privilege: Critical Discourse Analysis of the Narratives of Pakistani Immigrant Students in American Schools**

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### **Abstract**

This paper highlights the struggle that Pakistani immigrant students make during the process of learning English as a second language and the ways in which lack of proficiency in English complicates the process of learning and even hinders their academic growth. The major focus is on immigrant students at the beginning level of English language learning who come from less commonly known cultures and with their first language less commonly taught in USA. Discourse analysis of the narratives of three Pakistani immigrant students is presented and discussed in the context of language, identity and power relation.

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### **Introduction**

Kramersch (2006) claims that learning a language is likely to re-identify one's self; it is proposed that language is the ultimate medium of expression of innermost hopes, aspirations, awareness and conflicts, and it is through language that people learn about each other's thoughts, beliefs, ideologies, expectations, agreements and divergences. It is through learning about each other that they re-locate themselves with reference to each other hence re-position and re-identify their selves. This re-positioning, re-identification and re-location of the selves is possible if people share a common code of communication i.e. the same language. This paper is focused on those individuals who happen to live with each other but are unable to understand each others' language; for example immigrant students from third world countries, from very less commonly known cultures and with their first language (L1) that is very less commonly taught in the countries to which they migrate - for example, Pakistani students coming to America. These students who somehow slip through the language screening tests and are allowed to sit in the class, find themselves into an entirely new realm; English medium school! School, where the classroom discussion, instructional material, and even assessment and evaluation are all in English.

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Whereas, these students are not at all proficient in English hence can neither understand what the teacher talks about nor grasp what the students discuss in the class; consequently they can not share their views. They face linguistic and cultural alienation because they do not understand the world in which they work hence become strangers in academia (Zamel 1999).

They are still in the process of re-positioning themselves in this new realm of English medium instruction. Kramersch (2006) talks about the re-identification of self through learning a new language but the argument in this paper is that this process of re-identification of self through learning a new language is not easy, particularly in the case of immigrant students. The following verses of E.E. Mandelstam quoted by Rieber, and Carton, (1997) represent the same feelings

I forgot the word that I wanted to say,  
And thought unembodied, returns to the hall of shadows

This L2 inadequacy and the inability to communicate their thoughts threatens the sense of self of these Pakistani immigrant students and brings forth an identity crisis which leaves them feeling of lost and ‘deterritorialized’ (Ramanathan,2006). Consequently, these learners find themselves unable to fit in this new educational context where medium of instruction is English. The paper highlights the struggle that they make in order to reach the exalted state of being bilingual and also that how fears and threats become a source of motivation for learning English as they start to fight for survival and ‘alignment’ (Atkinson et al,2007) in this totally new cultural, linguistic and educational context.

The paper is structured around the following themes:

- language as an agent of power
- identity reconstruction through language
- language socialization

## **What is Linguistic Privilege?**

By Linguistic Privilege, we refer to having the privilege of being proficient in the language of instruction, the language of the text taught, content delivered, and the language of the communication in the discourse of teaching and learning.

## **Previous Scholarship**

In her paper “Of Texts AND Translations AND Rhizomes” (Ramanathan, 2006) the author presents her belief that as language stems out of culture, translating text from one language to another is in fact translating the text from one culture to another. The attempt to translate text from one culture to another is likely to ‘uproot and de-territorialize’ the text from its roots which later on keeps on floating like a rhizome and remains

unable to fix itself anywhere as there is always a certain ‘empty- spaciness’ (Ramanathan, 2006) between the languages and the cultures, hence no culture and no language on earth could ever be exactly like the other. The question here concerns students who migrate from one country to another, from one culture to another entirely different culture, and from one linguistic and social context to another. This paper focuses the problems that these students face in the schools because of the lack of proficiency in English and lack of awareness of the target culture. Blackledge and Palvenko (2001) believe that in unfamiliar linguistic and social environment individuals may experience identity vulnerability whereas satisfactory identity negotiation results in conversational interaction which in turn brings them a feeling of being understood, valued, supported, and respected.

Talking about the same identity vulnerability that second language (L2) learners face, Kramsch (2006) quotes an Arabic Allegory by Kilito (1994) in order to point to the identity crises that language learners face and compares the second language learner to a Bedouin who, when loses his way at night in the desert, barks like a dog to find out signs of the human habitation. The Bedouin has to first dehumanize himself to compromise on his identity for the time being in order to relocate him among other human beings. Similarly, the process of learning a new language can be insultingly painful and a threat to the learner’s core identity and his sense of self. It is this act of learning a new language which according to Kramsch (2006, p.98) takes the learner to a ‘third place of art and imagination’ which she further explains as a site of ‘linguistic anxieties and communicative joys, of symbolic gamble and a subjective power’ whereas, as a virtue of successful learning of the language “the new generation of bilingual authors celebrates multiplicity of identities and linguistic choices” (Palvenko, 2001, p.240). This is so because language and identity are co-related hence multiple identities are constructed and negotiated through language (Blackledge and Palvenko, 2001).

Previous studies have witnessed numerous examples in the same context. Halbe (2005) also brings forward a case study of an Indian student in a comprehensive high school in California. The author describes how that learner was painfully conscious of her limited English proficiency; hence she never talked in the class so as to avoid any embarrassing episode and was actually afraid of being made fun of by her classmates. The author also talks about the pity that the teachers felt for her but could not do much to resolve the situation. Reflecting upon the problems that immigrant students face in mainstream classes Harklau (1994) states, “in most of their school experience, students faced an overwhelming monolingual environment, where expressions of their native language and culture, if not actively discouraged were certainly not encouraged” (p.265). This paper also reflects upon the same notion and attempts to appreciate and acknowledge the pains second language learners face during the process of language acquisition,

particularly in cases where the second language is actually the medium of instruction in the schools they attend. Through critical discourse analysis, this paper examines the ways in which language exerts its power on the immigrant language learners, the role that language plays in the identity reconstruction of these learners, and on their socializing in the school.

### **Why Pakistani Students?**

Much has already been talked about language, identity and power but nothing in particular has been said about Pakistani immigrant students in the USA who come from a greatly different cultural, social, economical and religious set-up. All these factors together contribute to make learning English language a difficult task for Pakistani students who are different from others because in their case the cultural and social set-up is deeply inter-twined with religion and has strong reflection on language. In case of their national language (Urdu) word choice, selection of grammatical construction, suitable pitch, tone and volume is what that is mostly decided keeping in view the socio-cultural and religious norms. It's not the topic here to discuss whether or not good but there are different social roles assigned to individuals with reference to gender, social relation and social positioning in Pakistan which contribute to fabricate Urdu language. For example, the way men and women talk are different from each other. The tone, pitch and vocabulary civilized females use is definitely much more refined and polite than the one that the males usually use. The way a female talks to another female or her own family members is different from the way she talks to a male or a stranger. The same is with the males; the way they talk with/ for/ in front of a female is definitely different than the way they talk to/ for/ in front of another male. Most of it is because of the respect religion has bestowed to a female. Let us bring an example to clarify the point in a better way. When an aged, grey haired, Post PhD, Pakistani boss talks to his female subordinate who is quite young and just a graduate—he uses the second person pronoun 'AAP' specially meant to show deference or respect (otherwise, the pronoun used for a second person singular is 'TUM'); irrespective of the age difference, seniority in experience, education and rank, he gives her respect only because she is a female. The only reason to bring these examples here is just to tell how different and difficult it is for Pakistani immigrant students to come out of L1 influence and learn English that has quiet contradictory stylistics from Urdu

### **Methodology**

The major focus of the paper is to study the relation between language, identity and power and its effects on the L2 learners of English in particular. Critical Discourse Analysis of oral interviews has been used as the key

methodology for the study as it is the only approach that best deals with the language, identity and power relations.

## **Frame work**

Language socialization is the frame work for this paper where we analyze the students' narratives for language socialization themes (both for socialization with language and socialization through language). It is only by the virtue of being proficient enough in the target language that the learners can socialize with the people in that particular society hence negotiates their identities. Palvenko (2001) explores that during the process of second language socialization there is a possibility of negotiation of five clusters of identity including linguistic and social and class identities.

In case of the subjects of this study in the high schools of America, where medium of instruction was English, these students could socialize neither with the teachers nor with the class fellows not even with the text books or the other material used for teaching in the class room only because they were not good at English... not good enough to communicate and comprehend the speech made in English. These students were unable to socialize with language because of many reasons, the most important out of which remains the lack of familiarity with American society and its culture. As culture is embedded in the language itself, particularly in the semantics of language (MacKay, 2002) therefore, it is difficult to get a real command over language i.e. to 'socialize with the language' as well as to 'socialize with others through language' without knowing its cultural norms, values and traditions.

Identity reconstruction is another frame work used to closely observe the role of language in identity destruction and re-construction. As these students could not voice their ideas and show their knowledge in the class they could not get them selves identified among others as knowledgeable beings. It was through learning English that they gradually started taking part in the classroom proceedings which helped them prove their presence and identify their knowledge in the class.

## **Data**

The data for the paper comprises of eight hours and twenty two minutes long audio interviews of three Pakistani students who moved to U.S. after completing tenth grade in Pakistan and got admission in the high schools of California. The data was collected in October and November 2007.

Three Pakistani immigrant students named Sana, Rahat and Sara (pseudo names) were interviewed for this research. All three young women were undergraduate students in a university of Northern California and preparing for their admission to medical school. Rahat and Sara had migrated to USA with their families after completing 10<sup>th</sup> grade in Pakistan

and got admission in high school in California but Sana had started her college in Pakistan that she left after a few months because of her migration to America. She completed her high school diploma from an adults' school in US, as she had to work full time during the day to save money for her further studies and to support her family. The other two had had enough financial support from their families and did not have to work. Their only responsibility was going to high school and studying. All three of them belonged to underdeveloped cities of Pakistan and were genuine products of widely prevailing vernacular mode of education in Pakistan.

Rahat was 16 while Sana and Sara were 17 year old when they migrate to U.S.A. None of them had ever spoken even a single full English sentence of their own in their schools in Pakistan except Sara who could speak only a few phrases or words but not full sentences. All three young women had been quite successful students until 10<sup>th</sup> grade and had never had any problems worth-mentioning in following the class room proceedings or interacting with their class mates in Pakistan. Sana and Sara were familiar with basic rules of English grammar hence they could write some very basic level sentences while Rahat had never had the chance to write anything of her own. The system of English language examination they were exposed to in Pakistan, was basically grammar translation based where basic emphasis was on translating from English to Urdu and, particularly in their situation, reproduction of already memorized material. None of them had ever had any practical support from their parents in learning English, except for moral support, as the parents themselves were not proficient in English. The elder siblings however, helped them practice speaking English as they moved to U.S. roughly a year earlier than these women.

The rationale behind choosing these girls to interview was their eagerness to share their experiences and stories of struggle. Secondly, there were not many Pakistani immigrants in California who migrated after completing their 10<sup>th</sup> grade in Pakistan and continued high school in America. Selection of these girls helped as they had recently passed through this whole phase of basic education (till 10<sup>th</sup> grade) in Pakistan, high school and college in California and were then completing their undergrad programmes at university hence could better talk about their experiences in high school and compare it with their present state at school after having learnt the language to some extent. The reason for selecting the students who had completed 10<sup>th</sup> grade in Pakistan is that this is the point where secondary schooling finishes in Pakistan and the college starts, so transition in American High School at this point is a really significant turning point. The answer to why we preferred high school students over college students for this study is that, high school is a place where students are not really mature, they poke into each others' businesses and easily get affected and disturbed by their peers while college students are relatively mature in their attitude. This selection favors as it beautifully brings forward the process of

second language development under the influence of society. We did not intentionally choose younger children because they might not be as expressive as the elder students usually are.

Interviewing was preferred over questionnaire or any other techniques as it brings forward the true thoughts and the deeper expressions of the interviewees. The women were given full freedom to use either Urdu or English, or even to switch between the two languages so that the deepest and uninterrupted expression could be brought forward.

## Identity Reconstruction and Language as an Agent of Power

### Context

The extract below is Sarah's answer to a question regarding the problems that she had to face in high school due to the lack of proficiency in English.

(for all the transcriptions in this paper please see the transcription convention in appendix)

- 1 S:- a:umh... my: **major** focus is on *English*\
- 2 .../**problems** \regarding *English*/...
- 3 / **teachers** \would *tea: ch ya* in *English*/
- 4 /**students** would *talk* in *English* /
- 5 bu: t/.. <<you wernt good >>at **i:t**\
- 6 wha wz **your** reaction to **it** ?
- 7 **S1:** mm..I wz **so: scared**
- 8 nthen(mm) like feeling like...
- 9 so: **behind**\ ..
- 10 mmlike talking n stuff\ .
- 11 I was just like...
- 12 umh may be like/
- 13 ...\*jeisi **ihsaas kamtri:** ho jata hei \* \ ..
- 14 like complexity comes in you\
- 15 ...so: ... I think at **that** time I was feeling **that** in *me*.\
- 16 so: ...a..I think **this** was the .a .. one \
- 17 ...I was just **really scared** \
- 18 ...like some of my teache:rs /
- 19 like.. they just like>> wanted me to come in front>> of the
- 20 **class**/
- 21 n talk but I **couldnt** just **do it** /
- 22 .. so: ...yeah /

We selected this chunk as it explicitly tells how language played its powerful role in the academic lives of the immigrant students. Sarah's previous academic record from Pakistani schools was wonderful but there in



- 26 when you **have to** do your **class and homework** in  
**English**\
- 27 ..n you **ca+:nt** even **understand** the **instructions**\..
- 28 umh..(xH)..so:
- 29 .. iwas **really ha+:rd**
- 30 .. to do (xH)
- 31 .even you know \ (xH)
- 32 .a **/sma:ll project**\
- 33 ..o:r ...**home work assignment** \
- 34 .. here in high school \

In line 23 there is a rising tone after a pause. This rising tone tells that there is abruptness and strength in her expression. The use of elongated vowel and the high pitch with stress on word ‘tension’ in line number 24 ‘**lo:t of tensions**’ explicates the intensity of tension that she faced in school because of the lack of language deficiency. Her helplessness to do her assignment in English is evident from stress on ‘have to’ and ‘English’ in line number 26. Line 26 further explains the reason for her helplessness where she tells that she could not even understand the instructions. The use of pronoun ‘you’ seems to be made purposefully in order to bring in generality and reducing the personal effect so as to avoid the pain and embarrassment but the inability to do the assignment is clear by the use of word **can:t** with elongated vowel, stress and high pitch in line number 27. The prominent features of her talk are falling tones and exhalations. It seems as if recalling the problems that she faced made her stressful. It is in line number 28 that she takes a pause as if composing herself to say something difficult and then exhales. After this exhalation there is a pause for two seconds and then she says ‘so’ with a long vowel as summing up and then talks about the process of doing her home work that it was **really hard** with a strong stress and high pitch (in line number 29). In line number 30 she further explains what was hard for her i.e. ‘**to do**’ with an exhalation then she takes a pause for a second with a higher pitch and stress she tells that even a **sma:ll project** or a **home work assignment** was difficult for her to do. ‘Small’ in line number 32 is with an elongated vowel meaning that a project which could be even minor for others was difficult for her to do. If we look at the overall choice of vocabulary, words like ‘tension, hard, difficult, have to and cant’, indicate an overall impression of difficulty and pain. Use of adjective ‘lot’ and the adverb ‘hard’ with prominent stresses strengthens the sense of difficulty and struggle to overcome the situation.

Overall the extract gives a sense of great struggle and unease in the process of learning because of the lack of proficiency in English language. It seems as English is the gate keeper that does not let the learner get into the door of knowledge unless the learner socializes with the language and gets a good command over it.

## Context

This chunk has been taken from Sana's interview where she talks about the language difference being the greatest problem for her. Here she is answering to a question when she was asked about the major problem in language learning.

35 S: >>what was your>> **major problem** in high school \

36 S2: :umh.. well/.

37 >> iwaz the **language**>>(:)

38 the language difference:))

39 **I couldt understand** English **really** *ata:ll*

40 when I ca:me\

41 and(mm) I: had to **struggle** *alo:t* .

42 an.. work *rea:lly ha:rd*\

43 .. anda...umh...

44 {go to my} really **teachers office hours** afterwards\.

45 because during the class **whenever they lectured** I+:\  
 46 ...umh.. **most of the stuff** <<I dint ge:t>>\ .

47 what **they** were trying to say ..

48 so: / I would go to their office hours andmm..

49 get **he+:lp**/ and.. **ask** them {*again n agai+:n* }\  
 50 >>n wa were>> they.(xH) trying to say in the lecture ?.

51 wa was the **lecture** *about*\?

In line 37 there is a very quick and abrupt pace as after thinking she at once got a right answer and was in a hurry to tell. The repetition of the same utterance with the addition of word 'difference' in line number 38 tells that there is no doubt in language being the cause of problem in school. The repetition with the addition of word 'difference' tells that it is the difference between this learner's first language and the language of instruction that caused the real problems. The slight laughter after line number 37 and 38 reflects as if she feels embarrassed while mentioning this deficiency and is trying to cover this feeling through her laughter. Line number 39 and 40 serve to complete her thought that she could not understand English really. Stress on 'could not' emphasizes her inability to understand the language. Here in the same line, she uses the word 'English' just to name the language and clarify that it was this particular language that differed from her language and that she was unable to 'understand' it. The prominent stress on 'understand', 'really' and 'at all' puts more emphasis in the meaning whereas elongated vowel in 'ata:ll' adds to the totality of the lack of comprehension. Elongated pronoun 'I:' in line 41 gives the personalized feeling that she felt herself the only one passing through that crisis. A very strong stress on 'struggle hard' and the elongated vowel in 'ha:rd' in the same line brings a powerful expression to show degree of difficulty that she

had to face in her struggle. Stress on ‘work hard’ in line number 42 also conveys the same effect. The quickening pace in line number 46 simply refers that she wanted to quickly finish with that memory and did not want to make it prominent but more stress on ‘**most of the stuff**’ brings forward the fact that a greater part of the lectures was beyond her understanding. The slow pace with **again and again** brings the sense of lengthened process along with a feeling of delay as well as continuity in the struggle that she had to make to go to her teachers’ office hours. Explanation of the same point in line 51 seems to be an effort to make the fact clear that she was unable to understand even the key points of the lecture. The overall choice of vocabulary e.g. use of words like ‘really hard’, ‘struggle a lot’, ‘could not understand at all’, ‘again and again’ and ‘most of the stuff’ brings an overall impression of difficult situation and great struggle. The analysis explicates that there is no getting around the fact that her language deficiency caused great problems for her learning the other subjects in the school and she had to invest in great effort and time to understand all what the teacher wanted to say. Round the whole analysis, we never find witness that she had any problem with the actual content or the subject matter rather it was always actually the language of the content taught that hindered her approach and understanding of the real subject matter. She never talked about the difficulty of the content matter which means that either the content in itself was familiar to her or was under the grasp of her understanding but it was actually the language that did not let her understand it.

### Context

Leading the same discussion when she was asked if she could understand all what the teacher said, she told:

- 52 Well/ ..umh... could you../  
 53 {understand a:l what the teacher said during her office hour/}=  
 54 =no/.  
 55 not every thing/.  
 56 bu:t\ . since I: ..umh. >>was listening to the stuff >> second time\ .  
 57 so it made more sense  
 58 bu:t iwaz no+:t/ like hundred percent clear though:)  
 59 :even at that time \ .  
 60 yeah\

The immediate utterance of ‘no’ by Sana, which actually overlaps the question asked to her, is quite meaningful here. This abruptness for ‘no’ with a high pitch and rising tone and then repetition of this negation by the use of ‘not’ and explanation of the same notion in the next line with a greater stress and volume proves the fact that even after attending the office hours , not every thing was clear to her. Use of elongated vowels in ‘bu:t’ and ‘I:’ and the two second pause before umh and then a one second pause in line

number 56 reflect her thinking process. The quickening pace in <<listening to the stuff>> line number 56 seems just to manage the time that she has already spent in thinking the earlier part of the utterance. The presence of stress and high volume for **second time** tell that it was clear only because she was listening to it the second time. The greater emphasis on **it made more sense** in line number 57 conveys as it was really important for her that the text made at least some sense. There is an excitement in the voice that could be seen through the high pitch; this could be an excitement of getting some achievement. The elongated vowel in **no:t** in line number 58 and the stress on **hundred percent clear** are meaningful in a sense that even after spending so much time she was unable to get hundred percent meaning out of it. A slight laughter after this explanation seems to be a sort of self consciousness, embarrassment or hesitation for not being able to get every thing even after investing in great effort. The use of pronoun **'that'** in line number 60 refers back to 'second time'. The elongated vowel of even in line number 60 is also meaningful as it makes the comparison more clear that even after spending time in office hour and making these extra efforts, things were not as clear as they were to the other class fellows.

In this chunk she makes a claim that the extract made more sense but a disclaimer comes by the end which conveys that this achievement of getting the meaning was not hundred percent. There was still some thing missing.

## Discussion

Language is a means of communication and it is by the virtue of being proficient in a language that a successful communication between the individuals takes place. As these immigrant speakers are self conscious of their language deficiency, they hesitate to communicate with others. Consequently, they feel left alone and helpless in this process of language learning. We by no means want to claim that language learning is any negative process; under discussion is one of the different roles that language plays in different situations.

Language has the power that makes a learner confident and successful. It is after having passed through all the pains, sufferings and timely de-constructions that these students reach the exalted state of being bilingual with multidimensional vision and an ability to look at different perspectives of the world around which a monolingual speaker can never enjoy. But there is greater need to help these student over come this pain as soon as possible because not every learner has that dauntless courage and the unflinching determination to keep struggling in the dark alley of which apparently there is no opening. Zamel (1998) quotes a thought provoking quote from the journal of immigrant students which resonates the same point:

"I would like them to know that we are very responsible and we know why we come to college: to learn. We are learning English as well as the major of our choice. It is very hard some times and we do not need

professors who claimed that they don't understand us. The effort is double. We are very intelligent people. We deserve better consideration.....We made a step to college. Please make a step to meet us.” (p.254)

The careful analysis of the close transcripts from the data collected for this paper clearly brings forward the relation between language, power and identity. Language exercises its power on the individual under its direct effect. Most closely affected of this power are those who are beginners in this process of learning the language. All the three girls interviewed for this paper were at the beginning stage of this language learning. If we closely observe the transcripts, it is evident that none of the speakers say that the content taught was difficult for them rather the only thing that hindered their approach to the knowledge taught and the content delivered was their language deficiency. They had to spend a considerable amount of time to understand the language of the lecture before they could actually start thinking about the actual theme of the lecture or the other technicalities explained in it. Now, a student who does not completely understand the topic of discussion going on in the class, how can we expect him/her to participate in the discussion and prove his knowledge? This inability of the non-native speaker to participate in the discussion puts a mask of ignorance on his/her knowledgeable face ; hiding his/her real identity of a committed ,knowledgeable, hardworking individual and positions him as a passive scared and unconfident participant of the class who does not even comprehend all what is going on in the class. Conversely, the native speakers do not have any such problem because they are privileged enough to know the mother tongue.

It is thus required that the high school teachers pay special attention to these non native speakers in their class. While planning the lecture they should keep this factor in the mind that there might be an improficient learner sitting at the back of the class fighting with his own language insufficiency and trying to re-construct his lost identity. Harkla (1994) suggests that ESL teaching should be improved so as to address the language requirements of these immigrant students and also certain changes should be brought into the mainstream classroom setting, where the teacher needs to remember that an integral part of the class is the immigrant student who is sitting somewhere very silent and passive fighting with his language deficiency. Syllabus designers should keep space for these learners in the curriculum and most of all the ESL classes need to be really effective where teachers should teach real language in real life situation( Harmer, 1983 ) where our books should not be as what MacKay(2002) says ‘full of speech acts that do not act, do not mean any thing’. There lies even a greater responsibility on the shoulders of Policy makers who need to give special consideration to these minority students as Hautka (1994) suggests and Thomas(1996) quotes:

“We can turn our attention to more substantive problems – how to provide language minority students with an equal opportunity to learn challenging content and high level skills”.

This paper also leaves a thought provoking note for Pakistani language teachers, policy makers, syllabus designers and the teacher trainer to strive hard for bridging the gap between what majority vernacular medium schools deliver to language students and what should be the actual required level of language proficiency for these students to survive and succeed in English medium context of education.

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**Transcription Convention used in the paper:**

{ }	slow pace
*	code switching
xH	exhalation
:	elongated vowel
mm	held consonant
=	latching
<b>Bold</b>	high volume
<i>Italics</i>	very high stress
<u>Underlined</u>	stressed
: )	laughter
: ))	repeated laughter
/	rising intonation
\	falling intonation
.	one second pause
..	two second pause, etc.
<< >>	fast pace