When I first saw the title of the book under review, I thought: “This is the book I always wanted to write”, and for a short while felt a little twinge of jealousy. But then immediately this reflection came to my mind: could there be a person more suitable to write such a book than Professor Tariq Rahman, the renowned linguist who for more than three decades has engaged most of his academic efforts in research on sociolinguistic history and the relationships between language and politics among the Pakistani and North Indian Muslims; who has authored several books and dozens of articles devoted to these subjects; and who – without much exaggeration – might be called the founder of contemporary Pakistani sociolinguistics? So, rid of the last traces of envy, I started reading From Hindi to Urdu with impatient curiosity and – as might be expected – was not disappointed.

The book, which according to the author’s own admission cost him five years of painstaking scrutiny, was simultaneously published in both Pakistan (OUP Karachi) and India (Orient BlackSwan). This may be perceived as a meaningful or even metaphorical occurrence, especially with regard to its contents, as well as to the starting point on which Tariq Rahman builds up his considerations. Already in the introduction we are reminded of the shared linguistic tradition, common for what was later – mainly on the basis of political decisions and actions – artificially set apart and labelled as two different languages. However, according to the author one should not forget that for centuries “the name of the language we now call Urdu was mostly Hindi”, even though “then it was not this language” (p. 1). On the basis of this assumption Tariq Rahman defines so-called high-flown (Sanskritised) Hindi and so-called high-flown (Persianised and Arabicised) Urdu as two extremes, positioned at two distant ends of the linguistic continuum, still covering vast areas of northern South Asia. This continuum, which he calls Hindustani, constantly “veers towards one end or the other, according to the speaker, the occasion and the environment” (p. 99), but this is the medium through which vast masses in Pakistan can enjoy Bollywood movies and Indian fans can watch Pakistani TV dramas on Indian TV.

Rahman clearly highlights that his intention was not to write a history of Urdu literature, but to elaborate on the...
social and political history of the language by focussing on
the use of Urdu in different social domains, such as gov-
ernance, judiciary, education, media and entertainment
(p. 6). In successive chapters he step by step reveals and
examines various levels on which this language, which we
now call Urdu, was used for nearly seven hundred years.
At the same time he elucidates how the process through
which the politised modern Hindu and Muslim identi-
ties were created was in the course of time reflected in
language, and also how language was intentionally used
as a tool of crucial importance in this process initiated in
the second half of the nineteenth century.

In the extensive introductory part of his book, which
consists – apart from the “Introduction” itself – of the
three following chapters (“Names”, “Age”, “Origin and
Historiography”), Rahman tries to answer such key ques-
tions as when and where Urdu was born, what language(s)
it descended from and under what names it was known
earlier.1 Quoting vastly from primary sources (e.g. the
writings of Amīr Ḫusraw, Abū 'l-Fażl or Bābar) as well as
previous scholarly studies (such as those by George A. Gri-
erson, Amrit Rai, Christopher R. King or Shamsur Rahman
Faruqui, to name only a few), and using linguistic data
wherever possible, he opposes the commonly repeated
theory that Urdu was created in military camps in order
to facilitate interactions between the natives (Hindus) and
the newcomers (Muslims). In Tariq Rahman’s opinion,
such a fallacious assumption, namely associating the
birth of Urdu with Muslim (or Mughal) armies, was formed
to prove the ‘pure’ Muslim character of the language and
to support the process of its Islamisation. He is highly crit-
cical towards opinions generally presented by the Urdu his-
toriographers, like Gamīl Ġalībī or Ġāfīz Mahmūd Šīrānī,
who tried to convince the readers about the distinctive
Muslim character of Urdu, which is supposed to manifest
itself in presenting the emotions and ideas of Muslims and
the prevailing use of Perso-Arabic diction. As a result of
this attitude Hindu writers were usually excluded from
histories of Urdu literature, including the paradigmatic
textbooks used in colleges, and the perception of succes-
sive generations of readers has been formed in accordance
with this ideologically constructed historiography.

The Islamisation of Urdu, concurrent with the stan-
ardisation of the language, which took place in the eight-
eenth and nineteenth centuries has been thoroughly
analysed in the fifth chapter. Rahman describes the
essential influence of Urdu poets who in this period estab-
lished the standards for the medium of their literary pro-
duction, playing in this way the essential role of linguistic
reformers. He also underlines that only since this epoch
has Urdu begun to be considered as a superior class indi-
cator, seeing as it was used mainly by common people in
the preceding centuries (while the language of the elites
of those days was Persian). As a result of these processes,
Urdu, in the course of the nineteenth century, was getting
more and more closely associated with Islam, to become
finally, at the turn of the century, a symbol of Muslim
identity strongly propagated by the Pakistan Movement,
and perceived as an “Islamic language” of South Asia.
Rahman discusses this Islamic aspect of Urdu in the fol-
lowing, sixth, chapter, using a prism of Urdu religious
writings produced by all main schools of Islamic thought
present in South Asia.

According to the author, these politically and somewhat
artificially created bonds of the Urdu language with Islam,
pronounced by the reformers of colonial times and remain-
ing in line with the puritanical attitude of the Victorian era,
successfully stifled its natural, sustained associations with
love and eroticism sanctioned by literary practice. In the
seventh chapter, titled “Urdu as the Language of Love”,
Tariq Rahman describes this amorous tradition of Urdu as
well as the reasons for which it has been discontinued in
post-Partition Pakistan and India. His conclusion is rather
unequivocal: Urdu, having become a politicised symbol
of Pakistani nationalism and Indian Muslim identity, is
no longer used for expressing love and longing, and even
nostalgic throwbacks to the Mughal or Nawabi past cannot
revive this waning aspect of the language.

The eighth chapter of From Hindi to Urdu is devoted
to the question of the mutual relations between the
British and Hindustani in the nineteenth and early twen-
tieth century. The significant role played by the British in
shaping the linguistic situation of the subcontinent has
been investigated earlier by different authors. The British
rulers of colonial India were the first to use a local vernacu-
lar (Hindustani) “as a tool of imperialism” (cf. p. 201) in
various domains of power. They were also responsible for
creating and later reinforcing rivalry between Hindi and
Urdu as the markers of antagonistic Hindu and Muslim
identities. The British wrote grammar books and dialogue
books and produced all kinds of instructional materials
to learn the language as well as spread it all over India.
All these are known facts. But Tariq Rahman depicts a
less documented process, namely, how Hindustani was
taught and learnt by the British in India during colonial
times. He also addresses such issues as the attitude of the
rulers towards “the language of the colonized” (p. 202),

1 The names he enumerates and unravels are (here Anglicised):
Hindi/Hindvi/Hindui, Dehlavi, Gujarī/Gojri/Gujarati, Dakhni, In-
dostan/Moors, Rekhta and Hindustani, the latter examined by the
author in great detail.
the phenomenon of code-switching or attempts to write Hindustani in Roman characters.

In his book Tariq Rahman challenges widespread opinions more than once, undermining them by arguments and evidence gathered during his meticulous research. But he also sails into uncharted waters, dealing with unknown (or lesser-known) areas of the subject he has in focus. One such unexplored area is Urdu in India’s Princely States and the process of “Urduization” (pp. 228 ff.) in those among them in which Persian was partly or totally replaced by Urdu as a result of deliberate political decisions (chapter nine of the book). Of special interest for the author are the two most powerful principalities, Hyderabad and Kashmir, but he also sketches the situation of Urdu in smaller ‘Muslim’ states like Rampur or Bhawalpur.

The following five chapters (ten to fourteen) comprise a number of insightful analyses showing how the Urdu language has been used in different public domains, from employment in the lower levels of judiciary and administration, through education and print, up to the sphere of media and entertainment, i.e. radio, film and television. Rahman also ponders over what the political implications of such an adoption of the language are. Some previously unexplored problems are discussed in this part of the book, like for instance that of choosing the language in which programs were broadcast by All India Radio in the early days of this institution. The diverse sources of information used by Tariq Rahman during his research, comprising inter alia face-to-face interviews or popular websites, allow the author to shed new light on the subject and expand upon topics already studied by other scholars or by himself.

The book has been properly glossed and indexed. It also reads very well since the main text is interrupted by footnotes or references only occasionally. The huge, comprehensive bibliography (pp. 405–445) has been divided into five sections, containing successively: i) reports and official documents; ii) manuscripts and letters; iii) books and articles in Oriental languages (for the most part in Urdu, but also over a dozen in Persian and a few in Hindi and Pashto); iv) books and articles in Western languages; v) interviews, websites etc. There are very few minor typos traceable; otherwise, the book has been edited and published almost flawlessly.

What might be considered a drawback is the method of notation of words and phrases originally written in non-Roman (usually modified Perso-Arabic) script. Tariq Rahman opted for a simplified transliteration, which here and there is even mixed with common English transcription. This leads to some inconsistencies, for instance the erratic way of representing the semi-vowel wāw, which sometimes is represented by v (as in maulvi), sometimes by w (as in niswa; both examples are taken from p. 402, but there are others in the book). More confusingly, such a system of Romanisation does not allow the original spelling of the quoted expressions to be identified accurately. However, the knowledge of their exact form may be a key to success or failure when trying to correctly understand the text under scrutiny – especially in the case of a language such as Urdu, where variations in spelling are common in writings of all periods and a reader often deals with different lections of the same text. Unfortunately, inaccurate Romanisation is a common error in works which are not purely linguistic, even though they touch upon some linguistic matters – and Tariq Rahman’s book is not free of this fault either.

But putting aside deliberations concerning the necessity of more or less exact transliteration, one must admit that Tariq Rahman’s From Hindi to Urdu is an important and highly informative book not only for scholars of Urdu or for those who study the linguistic situation in South Asia, but also for those who are interested in connections and mutual influences between language, society and politics in general. His comprehensive, carefully documented and detailed study has every chance to gain the status of a classic, a mandatory volume in every decent book collection devoted to the sociolinguistics of South Asia.

2 Though transliteration systems do differentiate between Arabic, Persian and Urdu, in the examples adduced no such differentiation on language lines is implied.