

# The Theory of Language Ring: A Strategy for Foreign Language Diffusion in Pesantren

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Received September 29, 2025, Accepted December 16, 2025

## Abstract

Foreign language acquisition in *pesantren* is strongly influenced by the sociocultural environment created by the *kyai* as the central authority within the educational system. However, studies explaining language diffusion and immersion patterns in *pesantren* remain limited. **Purpose.** This study aims to formulate and develop the Theory of Language Ring, a hierarchical-concentric model of language diffusion within the sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic system of *pesantren*, with a case study at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor. **Method.** This study employed qualitative developmental research using a phenomenological approach. Data were collected through observations of the *kyai*, teachers, students, environment, and alumni of Gontor. The study also integrated sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic, and circular motion theories. Data were analyzed through reduction, display, interpretation, and conclusion drawing. **Findings.** The findings reveal that the Theory of Language Ring represents a unique model of language immersion and acquisition in *pesantren*. The *kyai* functions as the central linguistic authority whose speech prestige and hierarchical influence shape language diffusion among students. This immersive linguistic environment significantly supports foreign language acquisition, including among new students. **Conclusion.** This study concludes that language diffusion in *pesantren* operates through hierarchical and cultural mechanisms centered on the *kyai*'s authority and role modeling. **Originality.** This study proposes the Theory of Language Ring as a new contribution to Islamic sociolinguistics and culturally based foreign language education in *pesantren*.

**Keywords:** *Kyai, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, language diffusion, Language Ring Theory.*

## INTRODUCTION

Gontor, the Modern *Pesantren* in Ponorogo East Jawa was established in 1926 A.D. by three brothers known as *Trimurti*, the first authority in Gontor, which is believed to be one of the educational institutions in Indonesia that places great emphasis on foreign language instruction - Arabic and English as its formal languages.<sup>1</sup> Both languages had been introduced and spoken by *Trimurti* and the teachers; while the students of Gontor are obligated to speak formal language due to the student rule.<sup>2</sup> The two languages are not merely academic subjects; but became an integral part of daily life practices, reflecting a conscious effort to develop students' foreign language proficiency.<sup>3</sup> Here, language is considered the *crown of the pesantren*.<sup>4</sup>

Gontor is the modernized system of *pesantren* innovated by K.H. Imam Zarkasyi by integrating *pesantren* and *madrasah* system.<sup>5</sup> However, the *pesantren* education system with its boarding model reflects a deep awareness of how essential the *pesantren* environment is to the educational process.<sup>6</sup> Gontor environment plays a crucial force to the acquisition of Arabic and English—as a result of learning beyond the mother tongue. This acquisition can occur both in naturalistic environments or in daily life at *pesantren* within 24 hours and in formal settings.<sup>7</sup> Gontor's language environment consists of five competencies, these are: speaking, listening, writing, reading and teaching.<sup>8</sup> Since Kyai, teachers and students could speak formal language, than the process of language acquisition by newcomers is known as *language immersion*, an educational strategy in which a foreign language is used as the primary medium of

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<sup>1</sup> Abdul Hafidz Zaid, "Pendekatan Komunikatif Dalam Pengajaran Bahasa Arab (Pengalaman Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor)". *At-Ta'dib: Jurnal Kependidikan Islam*, 7, no 2. (December 2012): <https://ejournal.unida.gontor.ac.id>.

<sup>2</sup> Muhammad Aminuddin, "Kumunikasi Interpersonal Wali Kelas Terhadap Santri dalam Pendisiplinan Bahasa Resmi Gontor", *Sahafa: Jurnal of Islamic Communication*, vol 12, No. 1 Juli 2019; Pradi Khusufi Syamsi, "Pembelajaran Bahasa Arab di Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor", *Al-Ibtikar: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Arab*, 7 No. 2 (Oktober 18, 2018): 18, <https://doi.org/10.24235>.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Hafidz Al Fajar, "The Development of Arabic and English Language Culture in Modern Islamic Boarding Schools." *Jurnal Paradigma*, 17. No. 1 (April 28, 2025), [doi.org/10.53961/paradigma.v17i1.309](https://doi.org/10.53961/paradigma.v17i1.309).

<sup>4</sup> K.H. Hasan Abdullah Sahal dalam Ahmad Suharto, *The Garden of Wisdom: Spiritual and Philosophical Wisdom*. (UNIDA Gontor Press, 2025); Cecep Sobar Rahmat, et al., "Peran Bahasa dan Korelasinya dengan Nilai-Nilai Pendidikan: Studi Analisis atas Falsafah Taaj Al-Ma'had di TMI Al-Amin Prenduan", *Thawalib: Jurnal Kependidikan Islam*, 3 (1) (2022). [doi.org/10.54150/thawalib.v3i1.28](https://doi.org/10.54150/thawalib.v3i1.28).

<sup>5</sup> Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi, "Imam Zarkasyi's Modernization of Pesantren in Indonesia (A Case Study of Darussalam Gontor)", *QJIS: Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies*, 8, No. 1 (June 30, 2020): 161, <https://doi.org/10.21043/qjiss.v8i1.5760>.

<sup>6</sup> Abdullah Syukri Zarkasyi, *Pengembangan pendidikan pesantren di era otonomi pendidikan: pengalaman Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor*. (Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, 2015); Syaifudin et.al., "Manajemen Pesantren dalam Menerapkan Bahasa Arab di Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor Kampus 7 Kalianda Lampung Selatan." *Islamic Management: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam*. [Doi:10.30868/im.v4i102.3004](https://doi.org/10.30868/im.v4i102.3004).

<sup>7</sup> Krashen, S. *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. (Oxford, 1982. Pergamon, 1982); Sri Mulyani Rahmawati, et al., "Peran Bi'ah Luhgawiyah dalam Menunjang Pembelajaran Bahasa Arab di Pondok Pesantren Darul Huffadh Tuju-Tuju Kab. Bone", *JIP: Jurnal Inspiratif Pendidikan*, XI No. 1 Januari-Juni 2022. [Doi.org/10.24252/jp.v11i1.29670](https://doi.org/10.24252/jp.v11i1.29670).

<sup>8</sup> Pradi Khusufi Syamsi, "Pembelajaran Bahasa Arab di Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor", *Al-Ibtikar: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Arab*, 7 No. 2 (Oktober 18, 2018): 18, <https://doi.org/10.24235>.

communication and instruction.<sup>9</sup> and the distinctive characteristics of Gontor students is their adequate proficiency in Arabic and English.<sup>10</sup>

Studies on the sociolinguistic at Gontor has been carried out by many researchers. Such as Suryadarma et al. concluded that Gontor's approach, including interactive language sessions, cultural immersion activities, and peer support systems, has significantly improved the students' Arabic language skills and confidence in using the language outside the classroom.<sup>11</sup> Nuraini, et al. worked on Arabic Language Immersion at the three prominent institutions, including UNIDA Gontor, with established Arabic programs. The finding reveals that effective immersion is structured an integrated and spiral curriculum, intensive Arabic-only environments.<sup>12</sup>

However, to my observation, there has been no systematic *Theory of Language Ring* that explains how these foreign languages are disseminated gradually in layers form starting from the center of authority to the student community. This concentric phenomenon—as observed in the mentoring system, student organizational structure, and the designation of language zones—reflects a unique and distinctive process of language diffusion strategy within pesantren. Therefore, it is necessary to formulate *the Theory of Language Ring* in order to fill the theoretical and practical gap and to develop a strategy of language diffusion to strengthen the interpersonal communication skills among community members of *pesantren* within and or inter rings.

## METHOD

The study employed a qualitative method with clearly refers to developmental research, which focus on advancing or refining existing fields.<sup>13</sup> In other words, this study falls under the category of conceptual development. This development specifically pertains to the Theory of Language Ring strategy in strengthening speaking skills in target language (Arabic and English) where *Kyai*, teachers and *santri*,

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<sup>9</sup>Lambert, W.E., & Tucker, R.G. *Bilingual Education of Children: The St. Lambert Experiment*, (St. Lambert, Montreal, 1972); Cummins, J. "Linguistic Interdependence and the Educational Development of Bilingual Children". *Jurnal Review of Educational Research*. 49 No. 2 American Educational Research Association (AERA)-1979; Colin Baker. *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*. (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2001); Fred Genesee. *Learning Through Two Languages: Studies of Immersion and Bilingual Education*. (Cambridge, MA. Newbury House Publisher, 1978).

<sup>10</sup>Ahmad Bukhari Muslim dalam Dingot Hamonangan et.al. *Relevansi Nilai Gontor Bagi Pengembangan Karir Profesional: Pemiiran Para Doktor & Guru Besar Alumni*. (Unida Gontor Press, 2022).

<sup>11</sup>Yoke Suryadarma, et al., "Kaifa Kuntur Qama Bitashji' Nahwa at-Tullab Al-Judud Min Qaba'il Mukhtalifah fi Indunisiya Litahadduth Bil-Arbaiyah di Hayatihim al-Yawmiyah", *Al-Mahara : Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Arab*, 10 No. 1, Juni (2024M/1445H), <https://doi.org/10.14421/almahara.2024.0101.09>.

<sup>12</sup>Nuraini Nuraini, et al., "Arabic Language Immersion Models in Indonesia Islamic Universities: A Phenomenological Multi-Campus Study", *Ta'lim al-Arabiyyah: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Arab & Kebahasaaraban*, Vol. 9 No. 1 (2025).

<sup>13</sup>Ris'an Rusli, "Elastisitas Gontor dalam Tradisi Akademik dan Keilmuan" dalam Dingot Hamonangan Ismail et al., *Relevansi Nilai Gontor bagi Pengembangan Karir Profesional: Pemikiran Para Doktor dan Guru Besar Alumni*, (UNIDA Gontor Press, 2022); Richey, R.C., & Klein, D.D. *Design and Development Research: Method, Strategies, and Issues*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates (2007).

thereby sustaining the tradition of foreign language speaking that remains vibrant and relevant in communication skills from generations to generations.

The type of data used in this study falls under *field research*. The primary data were collected from *Kyai*, teachers and alumni encountered during many meetings relate to their solid foreign language proficiency throughout their lives in or outside Gontor. While secondary sources consist of supporting works that help illustrate and validate the concept of the Language Ring. The study also employed a qualitative method with a *phenomenological* approach<sup>14</sup> to understand *language ring* strategy in modern *Pesantren* in improving language immersion and acquisition among the disciples. Beside my *participan observation* as a *santri* at Gontor (1981–1986) in acquiring foreign education and languages, as well as my observations on *Pesantren Darul Ihsan Laimu Seram Maluku*, one of Gontor alumni *pesantren* that adopted Gontor system of education, where the Theory of Language Ring strategy was first observed and identified, implemented and conceptualized based on Gontor language immersion and acquisition as well as many alumni's *pesantrens* which I have visited in Jawa, Madura, Kalimantan, Sumatra, Lombok, Sumbawa and Sulawesi, who also adopted Gontor system.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### A. Theoretical Framework

#### 1. Sociolinguistics

According to sociolinguistics theories, language within a community does not develop solely through formal institutions (such as classes and courses), but also through social interactions embedded in hierarchical structures from the highest to the lowest.<sup>15</sup> However, at least there are six sociolinguistic concepts that form the foundational pillars of the *Theory of Language Ring*, these are:

##### a. Islamic Sociolinguistics

Fishman is known as a pioneer in sociolinguistics who emphasized the relationship between language, religion, and group identity. He developed a theory of language use domains and the importance of language in preserving ethno-religious identity.<sup>16</sup> Spolsky wrote extensively on how language is used for religious purposes and how language education policies can reflect religious values.<sup>17</sup> Al-Attas introduced an Islamization approach to knowledge, including language. He argued that language is not merely a tool of communication but a vehicle for Islamic values. He emphasized the importance of purifying key concepts in language to align with the Islamic worldview.<sup>18</sup> While according to Gontor, Arabic is the language of Al-Qur'an, the

<sup>14</sup> Sugiyono. *Metode Penelitian Pendidikan: Pendekatan Kuantitatif, Kualitatif, dan R & D*. (Bandung: Alfabeta, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Janet Holmes, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Fishman, J. A. *Language and Religion: A Journey into the Human Linguistic Landscape*. (Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Spolsky, B. *Language Policy*. (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Atas. *Islam and Secularism*. (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia- ABIM, 1978).

scholar who does not know Arabic he is not a scholar.<sup>19</sup> Gontor has structure from Badan Wakaf, Kyai, teachers and students.<sup>20</sup> All of them are able to speak Arabic and English, the clue to language rings.

Many books and articles also written by Gontor scholars in both Arabic<sup>21</sup> and English.<sup>22</sup> They also use the formal languages as a medium in teaching. Kyai Imam Zarkasyi taught Logic and many subjects in Arabic; Kyai Shoiman taught Prophet Tradition in Arabic; Kyai Imam Badri taught Comparative Religion in Arabic; Kyai Hasan Abdullah Sahal teaches Fiqh (Islamic Jurisprudent) in Arabic; Kyai Akrim Mariyat teaches English Reading, Kyai Professor Amal Fathullah Zarkasyi teaches Islamic Theology in Arabic, etc.

### **b. Theory of Language Immersion**

Key figures in the field of language immersion are Lambert and Cummins. Lambert introduced the language immersion model through studies conducted in Canada. He demonstrated that early full immersion in a second language yields better outcomes without interfering with the first language. He also developed the concepts of *additive bilingualism* and *subtractive bilingualism*.<sup>23</sup> Cummins expanded on this by developing the theories of BICS and CALP (Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency), as well as the *dual iceberg theory* concerning the development of two languages. He advocated for the *dual immersion model*, which maintains and develops the first language while simultaneously strengthening the second language.<sup>24</sup> K.H. Imam Zarkasyi who mastered Arabic and English actively has created Gontor as an immersion languages environment since 1936 when he introduced Arabic and English.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, when the new students admitted at Gontor, they find the formal languages are spoken by *Kyai*, teachers and

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<sup>19</sup> KH. Hasan Abdullah Sahal dalam Ahamd Suharto, *The Garden of Wisdom*, (UNIDA Gontoro Press, 2025).

<sup>20</sup> Prof. Dr. K.H. Amal Fathullah Zarkasyi, M.A. in Ahamd Suharto, *The Garden of Wisdom: Cultural and Historical Wisdom*, (UNIDA Gontoro Press, 2025).

<sup>21</sup> Like:

دروس اللغة العربية علي الطريقة الحديثة، إمام زركشي و إمام شباني، مراجعة الدكتور ف. عبدالرحيم، الجامعة الإسلامية بالمدينة المنورة، وقواعد الإملاء لصف الرابع و مبادئ علم المنطق لصف السادس كلاهما للأستاذ إمام زركشي، و مجاتي المستطفي عليهم الصرف، للشيخ أتيه حسنان، ودراسة في علم الكلام: تاريخ المذاهب الإسلامية وقضاياها الكلامية للأستاذ الدكتور أمل فتح الله زركشي، والتيسير في دراسة علم التفسير: المقرر لطلبة الفصل الدراسي الثاني في كلية الأصول الدين، للشيخ محمد يدرون شهير.

<sup>22</sup> Like: Introduction to Integrated Education, by Imam Bahraoni; English Grammar for class three upto class six; Developing Human Resources Through Hidden Curriculum: The experience of Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, Indonesia by K.H. Akrim Mariyat published at *At-Ta'dib: Jurnal Kependidikan*. Vol. 6, No. 1 Juni 2011; and many teaching books on Gontor's curriculum.

<sup>23</sup> Lambert, W. E., & Tucker, G. R. *Bilingual Education of Children: The St. Lambert Experiment*. (Newbury House, 1972).

<sup>24</sup> Cummins, J. "Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency, Linguistic Interdependence, the Optimum Age Question and Some Other Matters." *Working Papers on Bilingualism*, 1979: 19, 121–129; Cummins, J. *Language, Power and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*. (Multilingual Matters, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> Panitia Penulisan Riwayat Hidup dan Perjuangan, K.H. Imam Zarkasyi dari Gontor Merintis Pesantren Modern, (Gontor Press, 1996).

senior students who influence their acquisition which gives the clue to the language ring theory

### c. Speech Community.

The *speech community* concept emphasizes that language develops through shared linguistic norms within a community.<sup>26</sup> In this context, the *speech community* of Gontor and its alumni networks and their descendants, consists of a hierarchy starting from *Kyai*, then the senior students who became teachers later on, and the semi-senior students across all class levels, dormitories and activities. These individuals are distributed throughout the ecosystem of Gontor during 24 hours a day over the course in immersive educational environments. These include activities within dormitory life, classrooms, language clubs, sports, scouting, public speaking (*muhadharah*), student organization roles, scheduled tasks, and so on. They become daily agents of foreign language diffusion and influence, constantly exposing new students to Arabic and English. Surely, they form language rings at their due courses.

### d. Language Socialization Theory

According to Schieffelin and Ochs, *language socialization theory* explains how newcomers learn language through interactions with more senior members of a community who have the language.<sup>27</sup> This includes semi-junior students, junior teachers, senior teachers, and those in positions of highest authority—especially *Kyai*, who holds the highest social status and occupies the linguistic apex. *Kyai*'s influence plays a crucial role in the diffusion of foreign languages within the pesantren. Here language ring is noted and identified starting from *Kyai* as the inner most and core ring of language immersion.

### e. Linguistic Hierarchy and Prestige

Labov emphasized that language variation in society, particularly in schools, is heavily influenced by social status and prestige. If high-status individuals use a foreign language, others in the community are more likely to follow suit.<sup>28</sup> In the pesantren context, *Kyai* and teachers serve as the core and hinge of linguistic authority. This authority extends to the student council and language committees supervised directly by *Kyai* to all disciples including new students. Here again language ring is applicable in the middle and the outer rings of the layer students.

### f. Covert and Overt Prestige

Trudgill introduced the concepts of *covert prestige* and *overt prestige*, demonstrating that language is not only a tool for communication but also a marker of identity and social solidarity. Even linguistic forms considered "incorrect" by standard norms can carry high value within certain communities.<sup>29</sup> At Gontor, Arabic and English are

<sup>26</sup> Dell Hymes, "Models of the Interaction of Language and Social Life." In *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication*, edited by John Gumperz and Dell Hymes, 35–71. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972).

<sup>27</sup> Schieffelin et al. *Language Socialization Across Cultures*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>28</sup> William Labov, *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972).

<sup>29</sup> Peter Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society*. 4th ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2000).

forms of social recognition—whether formally or informally—toward users of a particular language or dialect, whether standard or otherwise. They represent group identity, authenticity, or social unity, which triggers students to imitate particular foreign dialects. This leads to the emergence of a distinctive *Gontor dialect*, understood primarily by its students and alumni as a symbol of their identity and shared solidarity.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, teachers at Gontor—especially those who have studied extensively in the Middle East, Europe, Australia, Pakistan, and Malaysia—achieved fluency in **standard Arabic (fusha)** and **standard English** at levels comparable to native speakers from the Middle East and Western countries.

## 2. Psycholinguistics

There are at least three key psycholinguistic concepts that strongly underpin and enrich the *Theory of Language Ring* strategy:

### a. The Input Hypothesis – Krashen’s Monitor Model

Krashen proposed that language learners acquire language when they are exposed to input that is just slightly above their current proficiency level—this is known as “***i + 1*** (where ***i*** = current level, **+1** = slightly more complex input). Within the context of the *Theory of Language Ring*, each concentric layer (ring) represents a level of input and the proximity of interaction: Senior students serve as sources of *i + 1*, New students receive input at their current level (*i*). And interaction across these layers creates a natural acquisition sequence—repetitive and organic language acquisition.<sup>31</sup> This model applies across activities within 24 hours in the classrooms or in dormitories. The learners are psychologically aware and morally driven to acquire and use the language. Therefore, it is the language rings or layers awareness.

### b. Social Interactionist Theory

Vygotsky introduces the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which highlights the gap between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance from more capable peers, teachers or mentors. Language functions not only as a tool for communication but also as a medium for thinking and cognitive development. The role of social interaction in language learning directly shapes the learner’s developmental process.<sup>32</sup> In this context, the ZPD aligns closely with the movement of *santri* from outer rings to inner rings in zones, facilitated by interaction with teachers, senior students, or peers. Language is acquired through mediation with those who are more competent—a core idea in ring progression, where senior rings are infused with a progressive spirit to transmit language as a mark of honor and pride to junior and newcomers.

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<sup>30</sup> Hisyam Zaini, “Pembentukan Kosakata Bahasa Arab oleh Santri Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor”, *Jurnal Ipmafa*, Vol II, No. 1 April 2013. <https://journal.ipmafa.ac.id>.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Krashen D. *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982).

<sup>32</sup> Vygotsky Lev S. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Edited and translated by Michael Cole, Vera John-Steiner, Sylvia Scribner, and Ellen Soubberman. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

### c. Usage-Based Language Learning

Tomasello proposed a theory that language is learned through repeated and meaningful use in actual communication, grounded in social context and real experiences. At the early stages, innate grammar is not central. Instead, language acquisition begins with general cognitive skills, such as imitation, communicative intent, and social collaboration. Language structures are built from the bottom up: Children construct basic units like words and phrases from contextual interactions, then develop grammatical patterns and constructions through repeated exposure and real linguistic experiences.<sup>33</sup> Gontor also applied this theory. Yet, within the *Theory of Language Ring*, the innermost rings use the target languages in foundational teaching contexts (as the language of instruction) and in formal religious contexts (such as sermons, study sessions, announcements, and motivational talks). Outer rings begin by absorbing the language through interaction and imitation—a process of *entrenchment through exposure*.

### 3. Gontor's Kyai Formula

In the process of acquiring and subsequently spreading target languages (Arabic and English) within Gontor environment—which is an essence in forming the *Language Ring*—Kyai of Gontor, who sits at the center of both linguistic immersion and authority, once posed a pivotal question to his students. As early as 1939, K.H. Imam Zarkasyi asked: “Do you wish, my sons, to be fluent speakers and orators in Arabic or English? And eventually master both languages? Then pay very close attention to this advice! MINIMALLY, for educational benefit and academic progress, the very least requirement is to abandon your regional languages entirely. If absolutely necessary, whisper in Bahasa Indonesia. The most important secret is: YOU MUST DARE TO ELIMINATE SHYNESS/EMBARRASSMENT AND NOT FEAR MISTAKES.”<sup>34</sup>

From a sociolinguistic perspective, Kyai of Gontor was effectively laying the groundwork for a speech community of target languages—both vertically and horizontally structured, moving up and down through concentric rings of interaction. Kyai continued: “Whoever dares to start early, and always maintains discipline while striving to speak as fluently as possible, he will be the most successful and advanced.” He then presented this linguistic success formula: Courage + Discipline = Gain. Shyness/Embarrassment + Lack of Discipline = Loss, “which may even result in bitter consequences.” From a psycholinguistic perspective, Kyai emphasized that language discipline was even more important at higher grade levels. Advanced students must not believe that discipline becomes less necessary with seniority. In fact, Class VI students must exhibit greater discipline, broader vocabulary (*mufradāt*), and more advanced sentence structures. He said: “A Class VI student must not be shy or afraid to speak with students from Class V, IV, III, II, or I—and vice versa.” This clearly demonstrates

<sup>33</sup> Michael Tomasello. *Constructing a Language: A Usage-Based Theory of Language Acquisition*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>34</sup> K.H. Imam Zarkasyi, *Diklat Pekan Perkenalan Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor*, (Sekretariat Gontor).

that Kyai was implicitly proposing the *Theory of Language Ring* through his structured, immersive approach to language development—from core ring to outward.

It is precisely Gontor-based theory strengthens the foundations of the Theory of Language Ring strategy—emerging from the cognitive experience and immersive training during foreign language learning at Gontor, and through widely participation in its transmission within pesantren. The key feature of this system is best captured in the saying: "Using one word in a thousand sentences across different situations and rings is far more effective than memorizing a thousand words without using them in daily life." Therefore, Gontor is a Natural Language Processor that enlighten the language rings formulated here as the result of directed method introduced by Kyai Zarkasyi since the beginning.

### B. The Core of the Theory of Language Ring

The process of language diffusion in pesantren community operates through many ways as mentioned above but here *rings strategy* is formulated and developed. Thus, *Theory of Language Ring* is, by definitions: *a concentric-hierarchical model of language diffusion within the islamic sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic system of pesantren where is kyai as the core ring.* In this study, nine hierarchical-concentric rings: authoritative, loyal, sociolinguistic, and psycholinguistic are the core of this linguistic theory. This unique structure reflects the radiant influence of Gontor’s Five Spirits (Panca Jiwa), Motto, and Aspirations in shaping the language rings (layers). Below is the breakdown of the language rings, the associated social actors, and their linguistic functions.

**Table 1:** Language Ring

Ring	Social Actor	Linguistic Function
1	Kyai	The deepest symbolic and linguistic authority, scholar; the central source of formal language, sources of loyalty and the primary ring (center of magnetism and immersion), a role model and courage. Fully resides in the pesantren. Highly respected and trusted, the center of the cosmology of language, morality, spirituality, and scholarly intellect.
2	Senior Teachers / Mentors	Reinforcers of linguistic norms in language acquisition and education; main mediators and implementers of language across life sectors. Present in all departments (KMI, student affairs, staffing, etc.).
3	Administrative Staff / Student Leaders	They are teachers and senior students. An adapt and mediate language in practical and work-based social interactions beyond the classroom but dormitories, activities, etc.).
4	Grade VI Students	Role models and enforcers of linguistic culture. Their roles ensures effective language acquisition. Central in student organization (OPPM), advanced Arabic (nahwu, sharaf), <i>fathul kutub</i> , <i>amaliyah tadris</i> , and final exams, <i>khutbah al-wada'</i> .
5	Grade V Students	The language usage indicators: they carry enforcement authority within dormitories, serving as the linguistic center of influence and movement either at public speaking or dormitory and scouting

6	Grade IV Students	Undergo intensive, guided training in language use through writing, memorization, drills, and transition to higher-level engagement.
7	Grade III Students	Involved in language absorption and early transmission to juniors, forming mid-level community rings.
8	Grade II Students	Strong absorption and growing transmission of language due to more frequent and deeper exposure from higher authoritative, social, and psychological rings.
9	Grade I/ New Students	Initial adaptation and socialization stage, relying heavily on imitation from inner rings, still influenced by their mother tongue.

Guided Milieu

shaped by Gontor's Five Spirits, Motto, and Aspirations, this concentric language environment is intentionally designed to guide language immersion and acquisition at all levels and situations.

This table presents a hierarchical process of language acquisition and dissemination within the modern *pesantren* environment, grounded not only in pedagogical mechanisms in the classrooms but also in social, cultural, and spiritual structures out of class. Therefore there are language rings everywhere either at the dormitory, clubs, and so on which could be studied empirically.

### 1. In-Depth Explanation of the Term "Ring"

The term "ring" or "circle" is used in naming this linguistic theory: *The Theory of Language Ring*, because of its conceptual foundation in geometric and circular systems, which are widely applied across various branches of physics and engineering. Several scientific theories and systems that inspire this linguistic metaphor include: Circular Motion Theory in Classical Physics and Cosmology.<sup>35</sup>

These examples underline that ring-shaped systems often center around a core of gravity, energy, or influence—a central node that determines the structure and function of the surrounding rings. In the same way, *The Theory of Language Ring* hold that *Kyai* - a figure of authority in a *pesantren* - serves as the central gravitational force and magnetic of all linguistic and spritual activities within the *pesantren* environment; and at the same time he is circles of language immersion, spiritual immersion, character immersion respectively.

Scientific and Metaphorical Integration: that conceptual strength of the *Language Ring Theory* lies in its ability to: Map linguistic diffusion as a dynamic, concentric, and hierarchical process. Reflect the structural organization of *pesantren* life and its

<sup>35</sup> Halliday et al., *Fundamentals of Physics*. 10th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2013) on Loop Theory in Dynamic Systems and Electronics; Katsuhiko Ogata, *Modern Control Engineering*. 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2010) on Electromagnetic Field Theory – Ampere's Law and Circular Loops; David Griffiths J., *Introduction to Electrodynamics*. 4th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2017) on Gravitational Rings and Cosmology; Sakurai, J.J., and Jim Napolitano. *Modern Quantum Mechanics*. 2nd ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2017) on Ring Gear and Flywheel Systems in Mechanical Engineering; Tanenbaum et al., *Computer Networks*. 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2010) on Ring Topology in Networking and Quantum Physics; and Barton Zwiebach, *A First Course in String Theory*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) on String Theory and High-Dimensional Ring Models.

cosmos, with the *Kyai* at the center, followed by layers of teachers, senior students, and younger students.

These rings give rise to linguistic loyalty as well as sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic relationships—embodying the teacher-student dynamic, the host-guest social contract, all within a “*directly guided system and milieu*”.<sup>36</sup> The rings interact and intersect dynamically in both formal and informal daily life activities, enabling constant communication and reciprocal influence across all levels. Every ring is capable of engaging with others, regardless of level or seniority, creating an inclusive, immersive sociolinguistic environment. The ring shape could be visualized like *spider web* or *umbrella circle*, where *Kyai* at the centre rings and the outer ring are newcomers.

## 2. Educational Intervention

Just as fields in physics can be controlled (using magnets, energy, etc.), the learning environment—including curriculum, practice, dormitory culture, daily/ weekly/ monthly/annual programs—can be designed to strengthen or accelerate the transition of language competence from the outer rings (new students) to the inner rings (senior students and teachers) and centre ring: *Kyai*. Where all rings are able to perform and could be tested imperically to show the language power at every ring. In Gontor, ones will find many activities that support the acquisition of target languages.

In physics, the speed of particles depends on the field and the present of energy. In language acquisition, the intensity of interaction and exposure (through imitation, immersion, and structured ring interaction) determines the speed of acquisition, as it is linked to social systems, psychology, and brain function. Repetition is especially crucial in this process as it combats the main enemy of memory: forgetting in the passage of time.<sup>37</sup>

## 3. Final Synthesis

The Theory of Language Ring can be viewed as a social transformation of physical ring structures into cognitive-linguistic structures. It applies the framework of geometry and physical dynamics to explain the patterns of language acquisition, diffusion, and competency stratification within a tiered educational community, pesantren. This integration strengthens the theory’s relevance not only in educational linguistics, but also in interdisciplinary research, connecting cognitive, *psychomotoric*, psychology, *affective* and sociolinguistics, and leadership into a cohesive educational model that could be imperically studied with the hypothesis: The more closer the pupils to the inner ring, the greatest language acquisition and immersion is; and the more strong language at any ring, the more positive language at pesantren. However, the head of zone or the head of dormitory or authorities who are in the inner rings of languages within the institution should be capable in the languages within pesantren.

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<sup>36</sup> KH. Hasan Abdullah Sahal in Ahamd Suharto, *The Garden of Wisdom*, (UNIDA Gontro Press, 2025).

<sup>37</sup> Scott Hagwood, *Rahasia Melejitkan Daya Ingat Otak dalam 7 Hari*. 14th ed. Translated by Abdul Qadir Shaleh. (Yogyakarta: Think Jogjakarta, 2012).

## CONCLUSION

The Language Ring Theory is a structured, circular, and hierarchical linguistic system within pesantren. It offers a new approach to understanding language diffusion within closed, socially structured communities in pesantren, that possess strong and profound language immersion environments. Grounded in sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic theories, physics-based ring theory, and decades of Gontor's educational philosophy, provides both conceptual and practical contributions to the development of foreign language education policies in religious educational institutions. While the ring shape could be visualized like *spider web* or *umbrella circle*, where Kyai at the centre rings and the outer ring are newcomer students.

By engaging multiple interdisciplinary domains—particularly within sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics—the theory shows significant potential for successful implementation. It opens avenues for further research in the field of linguistics, particularly among educational stakeholders, linguistics enthusiasts, and students of language education and pesantren management.

This theory owes its foundations to Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, especially *Trimurti*—the founders who established a deeply rooted immersion language environment of Gontor. Their legacy has produced thousands of alumni fluent in foreign languages, and has inspired numerous Gontor-affiliated pesantren led by its alumni as the scholars who continue this tradition and legacy. Moreover, in order to strengthen the *Theory of Language Ring* further empirical research ought to undertake interdisciplinaries.

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