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Morpho-Semantic Analysis of Digital Vernacular: A Case Study of Instagram in Pakistan



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Abstract

Online communication has altered the mode of linguistic expression and has opened up to novel online vernacular. Instagram in Pakistan is an abundant location of the bilingual and hybrid language usage that incorporates English and Urdu using morphological and semantic innovation. This present research examines the morpho-semantic processes of meaning construction and communication based on Pakistani Instagram users' vernacular and finds the most important morphological mechanisms of constructing the digital vernacular of the country. Simulated Instagram captions, comments and hashtags were studied as a qualitative, descriptive research with the help of morpho-semantic analysis. The information was explained in terms of the digital linguistics and morphology frameworks, so, there were the processes of blending, affixation, borrowing and Romanization. Findings showed that there was a high frequency of code-mixing, morphological creativity and semantic compression. Users had used the hybrid linguistic stitches to convey humor, feeling and cultural identity and led to the creation of so-called glocalized discourse, which was representative of the bilingual culture in Pakistan. The research concludes that Pakistani Instagram vernacular is a good example of linguistic hybridity, morphology, and semantics meet to display individuality, community, and cultural identity in online conversation.

Keywords: Morpho-Semantic Analysis, Case Study, Digital Vernacular, Pakistan, Instagram

Introduction

The development of digital communication has radically transformed the ways that the language plays the role of a means of social interaction and identity formation. On the Internet, including in Instagram, linguistic spaces are permeable which means that users can creatively merge forms, scripts, and meanings to result in what scholars call digital vernaculars a local, informal and multimodal versions of online language (Tagg & Sargeant, 2019). These vernaculars are the effects of technology, culture and multilingual competence which changes the traditional linguistic practices into the dynamic hybrid ones (Androutsopoulos, 2020). The example of the use of morpho-semantic patterns that integrate linguistic and cultural identity can be observed among Instagram users in Pakistan, where English and Urdu are coexisting with many regional languages.

Intersection at both morphology (structure and formation of words) and semantics (meaning represented) is core to the online linguistic innovation. It is not the first time that morphological processes including compounding, clipping, affixation and blending are more and more common in digital discourse in combination with code-switching and transliteration (Shahlee, 2022). Users often mix English with Urdu and form hybrid lexical meanings such as vibe scene, mast look or selfi wali feeling, which have contextual meanings not captured by the literal translation. This linguistic creativity can be used as a manifestation of functional economy and expression of sociocultural identity (Barton & Lee, 2013).

Though the question of code-switching and transliteration has been already

investigated in relation to Pakistani digital discourse (Nagra et al., 2022; Qutab et al., 2020), the mechanism of morphological and semantic processes being co-constructive in relation to digital vernaculars is still under-studied. Earlier researchers have mainly concentrated on the sociolinguistic or pragmatic aspects without taking an emphasis on the morpho-semantic frameworks that form the basis of creative language usage. As a result, this research satisfies the necessity to develop a systematic morpho-semantic examination of the Instagram language, thus, emphasizing the formation of the meaning based on the word-formation processes and semantic innovation in the Pakistani online environment.

This study holds some importance in a number of ways. First, it adds to the expanding body of research on digital linguistics by studying the interaction between morphological creativity and semantic constructing in bilingual online communication. Second, it places the Pakistani Instagram discourse in the more general context of global digital vernaculars which provides evidence on how local linguistic traditions may be subjected to new media conditions. Third, it improves knowledge about the use of hybrid linguistic strategies as a negotiating way by users in digital environments to negotiate identity, emotion and community (Page, 2021). Through this, it adds value to cross-cultural view of language change, creativity, and online communication.

Research Objectives

To explore how the meaning is constructed and communicated morpho-semantically by Pakistani Instagram users.

To analyze the major morphological processes involved in the formation of digital vernacular on Instagram in Pakistan.

Research Questions

How the meaning is constructed and communicated morpho-semantically by Pakistani Instagram users?

What major morphological processes are involved in the formation of digital vernacular on Instagram in Pakistan?

Literature Review

There has been the use of digital communication that has changed the use of language worldwide and Pakistan is not an exception. Newer research studies are being done on the effects of social media in lexical, morphological, semantic and pragmatic features of Urdu and English (and their blends). This review can be described as a summary of studies conducted on code-mixing/code-switching, word-formation processes, semantic shifts and digital vernacular/slang and the orthographic/typographic variation in connection to the morpho-semantic construction of meaning particularly within a Pakistani social media setting.

Code-Mixing, Code-Switching and Borrowing

A study has employed the socio-pragmatic factors in Urdu-English code-switching by applying models like the Markedness Model by Myers-Scotton and the categories by Poplack and discover that intra-sentential switching is a type of identity negotiation and social alignment (Rafiq et.al., 2022). Also, code-mixing in official written sources (textbooks, newspapers) has received attention: as report on the occurrence of English

lexis in Punjab textbooks, where Urdu words are substituted by English counterparts which makes them worried about the identity of the language (Sadia & Zubair, 2018). It is also a common phenomenon to borrow the words. An example of Tania Ali (2020) is the morphological integration of words in Urdu into Pakistani English, e.g. Urdu affixes or phonological adaptation, particularly as speakers consider the loan words to be natural elements of their form of English. (Ali, 2020). On the same note, Shaukat and Talaat (2021) discuss the use of lexical borrowings in English in the context of Urdu narratives by early-school children and demonstrate that even young children resort to technical or domain-specific English lexemes when there are no analogous Urdu lexemes or when they are less familiar. (Shaukat & Talaat, 2021).

Word Formation, Neologism and Morphological Innovation

Pakistani vernacular has been found to have processes of word formation through blending, coinage, compounding, clipping, affixation and extension. The recent study about word formation processes in Urdu follows the process by which media, globalization and the difference in generations give rise to new expressions. (Ghazanfar et al., 2025). Another study examined neologisms in Instagram and Facebook and concluded that the most prevalent processes in English neologisms in these platforms are blending and compounding. (Begum, Bhatti & Javed, 2024). The language of advertising is also evidence. In a study, it is viewed that morphological deviations in print media ads (neologisms, orthographic changes) as the tool to influence consumer perception. Such deviations usually mix English root with Urdu phonology or adapted affix. (Khattak, Shah & Shah, 2024).

Semantic Shifts and Evaluative / Pragmatic Meanings

Besides morphological innovation, semantic change of borrowed items is also well known. A study describes the process of metaphorical extension, broadening, narrowing, pejoration, and elevation of the use of English loanwords in Urdu in relation to YouTube, X, and Tik Tok. (Zarif, Hammad & Seemab, 2025). Slang research can add to it: Deciphering the Digital Vernacular: A Study of Generation Z Slang examines the use and forms of slang in university students and demonstrates such semantic functions as intimacy, identification, humor, and belonging. (Tufail, Asgher & Ali, 2024). Another study focuses on examining the way social media is speeding up the creation and diffusion of slang among Pakistani young people with the researcher identifying hybridized slang (Urdu-English blends, abbreviations, language of internet memes) as the key to youth identity. (Munawar, Mansha & Hassan, 2024)

Orthographic and Script Change: Roman Urdu and Typographical Strategy

Due to the prevalence of Roman writing of Urdu in the digital environment, studies of Roman Urdu are prolific and specifically applicable to morpho-semantic analysis. Sentiment Analysis of Roman Urdu Text using Social Media samples survey Roman Urdu sentiment analysis technique, stating that their spelling deviation and non-standard orthography makes algorithmic classification difficult. (Qutab, Malik & Arooj, 2020). According to Ahmad et.al., (2025) models to identify Roman Urdu slang and text in comment boxes on Facebook, pointing to how the differences in spelling are reflected in semantic or emotive focus.

There are also studies that discuss the influence of digital media in script and style

change in the Urdu language in general. In the study, *Digital Media and the Urdu Language: A Critical Study of Contemporary Influence on Script and Style of Expression*, it is stated that young people are choosing Roman script, informal forms and hybrid forms of writing to an extent that they are sacrificing standard Urdu script and style. (Khan, 2025)

Identity, Power and Language Attitudes Implications

Several works emphasize the fact that digital vernacular is not only a linguistic creativity but also an identity performance and power relations. A study in this direction investigates the influence of social media on the linguistic expression of the youth, finding that signs, symbols, emojis and hybrid forms (Urdu-English etc.) are applied both to belong and to differentiate; however, the respondents also reported that they are concerned about the loss of the use of formal standards (Mehmood, Irfan & Hussain, 2023). There is another issue with the impact on education i.e. the linguistic practices of social media are sometimes at odds with the requirements of formal and academic writing (Sikandar, 2025). Although these studies are very insightful, there are still some gaps:

Instagram data Morphological Processes:

Begum et al. (2024) investigate neologism in Instagram and Facebook but most studies consider mixed corpora or put a lot of emphasis on discourse/function but not systematic description of morphological processes (borrowing, blending, clipping etc.) in Instagram in particular.

Morpho-semantic Interaction: The dual focus- the way morphology is applied in a semantic context- is not well investigated. In the same study, semantic shifts of loanwords are investigated but without necessarily being closely related to morphological innovations (blends, affixes, orthographic manipulation).

Orthographic Variation as Morphology:

Romanization spelling variants have been handled largely as orthographic problems; less research has been done on how these variants are morpho-semantically used to indicate meaning (vowel stretching, duplication, numerals) to influence morphological parsing, or to create stance/emphasis.

Stylization and Multimodal:

The combination of the morphological processes with the meaning construction through the use of emojis, hashtags, capitalization, etc. is underrepresented.

Demographic Variation:

The age, region, education and urban/rural differences are not necessarily taken into full consideration when it comes to morphology-semantic studies; most studies deal with young generations in urban universities.

Research Methodology**Research Design**

The study used the qualitative descriptive design based on morpho-semantic and discourse-analytic perspective to investigate how morphological creativity and

semantic innovation are used by Pakistani Instagram users to create and express meaning. The qualitative method was appropriate as digital vernacular is a dynamic and context-specific and socially embedded language phenomenon, which cannot be completely measured by quantitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2019; KhosrowaviNik, 2020). The analysis was a morphology parsing coupled with semantics recognition to examine the meaning and form of linguistic novelties in the Instagram discourse.

Data Source and Sampling

The fabrication of data was done in a realistic way so as to mirror the linguistic forms of actual Pakistani Instagram communication. No direct users were extracted to extract any post that had any privacy or ethical considerations as explained by Townsend and Wallace (2016). Rather, 300 fake items (120 captions, 120 comments, and 60 hashtags) were designed by reflecting real linguistic tendencies in the Pakistani social-media researches. Such characteristics of the simulated corpus as Roman Urdu, English borrowings, and code-mixed composition were in line with discovery in Qutab et al. (2020) and Nagra et al. (2022). The simulation also made sure that there were realistic digital language phenomena, including orthographic variation, slang and neologisms that are representative of the discourse of the online youth in Pakistan.

Analytical Framework

The level of the morpho-semantic framework was used on two levels. To begin with, morphological analysis was used to determine word-formation processes such as borrowing, blending, compounding, clipping and affixation. Aronoff and Fudeman (2022) principles of morphological analysis and Haspelmath and Sims (2020) of cross-linguistic morphological typology were used to draw an analytical guidance. Second, the semantic and pragmatic interpretation were contextualist (Cruse, 2011), meaning the focus on the emergence of meanings in social interaction and digital creativity. This two-way analysis allowed determining the strategies of meaning-making that combine morphology and social intention-humour, identity performance and evaluation.

Data Analysis Procedure

All simulated texts were coded by hand (morphological and semantic). Morphological level entailed the tags of root type, affix type and the source of blends whereas the semantic level represented evaluative meaning, stance and pragmatic force. Upon the reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) common patterns were observed throughout the corpus to show how Instagram users modify the language to convey individuality and social correspondence. The semantic role of visual and paralinguistic aspects (emoji, repetition, capitalization) was identified, which was in line with the perspectives of multimodality on digital discourse (Page, 2021).

Data Analysis

The present study has analysed a deliberately constructed corpus of Instagram texts representative of a Pakistani digital vernacular. The constructed corpus contains 300 items (120 captions, 120 comments, 60 hashtags/short replies) sampled in order to represent common patterns found in recent research on Pakistani social media (Roman Urdu use, code-mixing with English, slang and morphological innovation).

The samples were constructed from authentic attested patterns found in previous studies and close observation of platform norms; the representative passages selected display realistic exposition (not word-for-word exposition of private utterances). The analysis is qualitative and descriptive, based upon manual morphological breakdown of forms with a semantic/pragmatic interpretation.

Representative Simulated Samples

Caption: “kal ki chai ne mood set kar diya — #MastDay” (gloss, English: “the chai of yesterday set the mood — #MastDay”).

Comment: “yeh place to total vibe hai, yaar!” (loanword plus intensifier).

Caption: “Examz over, finally!! #RelievedAF” (blend: exam + pluralizer z; English suffix).

Hashtag: “#dostiforever” (Urdu lexeme + English).

Comment: “dil, but moving on — kamina log” (Urdu emotive word + derogatory).

Caption: “Selfie + filter = instaPerfection” (blending + English compound).

Short reply: “G” (abbreviated slang, signifier of letter).

Hashtag caption: “#GharSeOffice” (Roman Urdu compound). These samples illustrate the main morpho-semantic phenomena dealt with below.

Morphological Processes

It was found that there are five prevalent morphological processes that influence Pakistani Instagram vernacular, among which are (1) borrowing & code-mixing, (2) blending/compounding, (3) affixation/clipping, (4) orthographic respellings (Romanization variants), and (5) acronymization/slang abbreviation.

Borrowing & Code-mixing

Many of them incorporate English word units directly into Roman Urdu captions (e.g., vibe, mood, filter, selfie). This is similar to conclusions made by Pakistani netizens who often combine English in their speech with English elements taking on a discourse-pragmatic position (content word, evaluative words) and Urdu providing syntax and emotive words. Code-mixing is a source of indexical social capital and also as semantic accuracy (English words tend to have genre-specific meanings).

Blending & Compounding

An example of productive blends is where two roots form a blend without an overt affix (e.g. the word Examz of the phrase exam + -s (playful plural)). Such compounds as GharSeOffice fuse entire lexical items into new multiword hashtags that act as units of semantic complexity. Complex social meanings (identity, aspiration, humour) are condensed into small tokens that are taken as attention-grabbers in these processes. Mixed language is an effective tool of developing in-group slang among younger users.

Affixation & Clipping

Roman Urdu Affixal play is the reinterpretation of English morphology in Roman Urdu (e.g. adding English comparative/superlative/plural affixes to Urdu stems: mast+day, selfie-s), and clipping (e.g. G for gang or yaar → yr in fast chat). These hybrid affixation marks give the impression of playing with grammar and pragmatic stress. This is consistent with those findings which suggest that social media

conditions reduce morphological transparency, which promotes analogical reuse and morphological borrowing.

Orthographic Re-spellings (Romanization)

Due to the common writing of Urdu with Latin letters in Instagram, the orthographic forms (e.g., kya/kyaaa/kiya, hai/hey/ha) spread. Such forms have pragmatic force: extended vowels (e.g., yaaar) are signs of the affective lengthening; the doubling of letters is an indication of emphasis; phonemes could be replaced by numbers or symbols. Therefore, romanization decisions, are morphological-pragmatic signs, and not neutral transcriptions. A number of computational works emphasize the dominance and analysis problem of Roman Urdu in social sites.

Acronymization and Alpha-betic Slang

Single letter assessment (e.g., G, F), acronyms (e.g. AF in #RelievedAF) and clusters of emojis are condensed semantic units. The acronymization frequently adheres to the English patterns of Internet, but is re-used to convey culturally specific feelings, which frequently combines with the Urdu lexis.

Patterns of Semantics and Functional Interpretation

The recurrent semantic/pragmatic processes are associated with morpho-semantic processes: identity & stance marking, evaluative intensification, humour/irony, and indexical in-group signaling.

Identity and Stance

Terms made up of two languages are often indicative of generational affiliation (young, modern) and cosmopolitan affinity; an example is insta+Urdu root conjunction, which evokes both attachment to the platform and to the place. It is an application of mixed morphology that places the speakers in peer groups and expresses positions (playful, ironic, boastful). Recent sociolinguistic research of Pakistani Instagram focuses on such indexing of style.

Evaluative Intensification

The intensifiers are the results of morphological lengthening and affixal play (e.g. vowel stretching, added suffixes), which are semantically intensifying sentiment: mast tt = greater positive evaluation. Combination suffixes like -z (as playful plural) have both attenuating and communal senses in use.

Humour and Semantic Shift

A lot of blends are used in humorous reanalysis (e.g. instaPerfection is ironical self-reflexive). The phenomenon of semantic bleaching can be noted when the original meanings of the lexemes change due to the frequent use of social media (e.g., vibe loses the meaning of a feeling and obtains the meaning of a general appraisal marker).

Pragmatic Compactness

Hashtags and blended compounds represent propositions (e.g., in the complex situation of remote work, the hashtag GharSeOffice is used to encode it) and assume discourse-structuring functions (topic frame, meta-comments).

Analytical Implications

The Pakistani Instagram vernacular morpho-semantic profile is indicative of imaginative grammatical repurposing, bilingual repertoire, platform affordances (character limits, hashtag culture) and youth stylistic economies. Morphological innovation does not happen by chance: it relies on predictable processes (borrowing, blending, affixation) to perform semantic work- stance marking, identity indexing, humour, and efficient topicalization. Computational and corpus analyses of Roman Urdu support both the magnitude and regularity of these patterns, but orthographic diversity still provides a challenge to automated parsing and quantitative generalization.

Findings and Discussion

The morpho-semantic analysis of simulated Instagram conversations has shown that Pakistani users use creative word-formation and meaning-making approaches to the use of bilingual repertoires, affordances of digital technologies, and socio-cultural identities. What was most conspicuous was the regular interaction of the morphology of the English and Urdu language, which proved the fact that users freely combine the linguistic tools to form expressive, humorous, and indexed-identity language. There were five major morphological processes that appeared, including borrowing, blending, affixation, clipping, and Romanization. The hybrid linguistic economy of the Pakistani social media was reflected by borrowing and code-mixing of English words (mood, vibe, filter) in the Roman Urdu structures (Nagra et al., 2022). Combinations and mixtures like #GharSeOffice or instaPerfection were very productive and creative, condensing multiple meanings in one, visually unified token. The attachment of English plural or comparative endings (e.g., examz, mastest) reflected the grammar

a playful kind of manipulation that conformed to the morphological manipulation seen in online contexts (Shahlee, 2022). The use of romanization in (e.g. kyaaa, yaarr) showed the extent of emotion and stress and was highlighted in the research of Qutab et al. (2020), who showed that it is of much significance for the pragmatic meaning in online conversation.

These morphological constructions had specific communicative functions at the semantic level, such as those signaling stance, humour, evaluative valency and group identity. The use of stretched vowels or compound words was used for increasing emotion or humour effect, which would conform to the statement of Page (2021), that online conversation tends to contain emotion in typographical or morphological context. That words in English were prestigious and cosmopolitan, while the language elements in Urdu were there to ground the discourse in local culture, thus constructing a dual-indexed identity that was reflective of the glocalized linguistic practice (Farid, 2023). The use of emojis and hashtags acted as factors of semantic amplification in that they supported the morphological inventiveness and gave interpretive nuances.

The Pakistani Instagram vernacular showed an ecology of linguistic presentation namely that it had a hybridized character in that morphological and semantic factors mutually influenced each other to fulfil social needs. This supports the argument of KhosraviNik (2020), that the language of social media constituted the social identity discourse allowing the presentation of the self to affect a new and playful styled identities through the hybridity of languages.

Conclusion

The current study concludes that the Pakistani users of Instagram have a specific morpho-semantic repertoire, which can be associated with linguistic hybridity, creativity and identity formation in online communication. As the simulated corpus showed, morphological innovation (that is, blending, borrowing, affixation, Romanization) can be a dynamic instrument of expressing individuality, humor and social belonging. This morpho-semantic play is an example of the manner in which users engage in bargaining bilingual resources to project subtle meanings that are both local and global at the same time. The results show that code-mixing in English-Urdu is not an incidental phenomenon in language but a conscious stylistic decision. English words have prestige, modernity connotation whereas the lexical elements of Urdu language maintain cultural authenticity and heartfeltness. They create a combined linguistic self that is a global but localized identity that reflects the digital experience of young Pakistanis (Farid, 2023). Morphological creativity, including vowel stretching and hybrid compounding, makes emotional expressivity more available and gives users visual and structural control of meaning, which is in line with Page (2021) perspective that digital discourse incorporates textual and multimodal cues to form affective meaning.

The vernacular of Instagram illustrates more broadly the processes involved in the development of a digital discourse which is characterized by economicity, visuality and interactivity, where the processes of meaning production are through brevity, visuality and interactivity. The units of meaning i.e. semantic units are hashtags, emojis and blends which are deployed as coded affectivity, relationship to context and cultural references. This is aligned with the argument made by KhosroNik (2020) that social media networks favour identity performance which is made possible by linguistic experimentation and multimodality. Overall, the current study supports the argument that the Pakistani digital speech is a dynamic linguistic ecosystem in which morphological and semantic creativity is a demonstration of the socio-cultural evolution, technological change, and generation creativity. Although the nature of the dataset was also such that for ethical reasons the emerging functions of it were simulated, the comparability of the dataset with the real linguistic features, does provide the prognosis that the digital vernacular in Pakistan needs greater empirical and computational analysis. The future suggestion for the enhancement of knowledge in this regard is that the study can be enlarged with a larger real corpus, generalized across platforms and extensions can be made to embrace the study of empathy and emotion-based analysis too on the knowledge of the ways in which morpho-semantic creativity exists in respect of the reinvention of the digital communication developing in the social multi-lingual fields within which Pakistan exists.

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