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**Code-Switching and Pragmatic Meaning in Multilingual Pakistan: A
Socio-pragmatic Study of Indigenous Languages in Urban and Rural
Settings**



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Abstract

Pakistan is a linguistically diverse country characterized by the coexistence of multiple indigenous languages alongside Urdu and English. In such a multilingual ecology, code-switching—the alternation between two or more languages within a single interaction—has emerged as a central communicative strategy. This study investigates code-switching not merely as a structural linguistic phenomenon but as a socio-pragmatic resource through which speakers construct identity, negotiate power, signal solidarity, and manage interpersonal relationships. Specifically, the study examines how speakers of indigenous languages such as Punjabi, Saraiki, Sindhi, and Pashto alternate with Urdu and English in urban and rural settings of Pakistan. Adopting a mixed-method approach, the research draws upon 48 hours of recorded natural conversations, 30 semi-structured interviews, and 120 survey questionnaires collected from urban centers (Lahore, Karachi, Multan) and rural communities in Punjab and Sindh. The data were analyzed using interactional sociolinguistics, the Markedness Model, and socio-pragmatic theory to identify patterns, motivations, and pragmatic functions of code-switching. Findings reveal significant differences between urban and rural speakers in both frequency and function of code-switching. Urban speakers display frequent integration of English into Urdu and regional languages, often indexing modernity, education, and global affiliation. Rural speakers primarily alternate between indigenous languages and Urdu, using code-switching for accommodation, clarification, and institutional alignment. Social variables such as age, gender, and educational background strongly correlate with switching behavior. The study concludes that code-switching in Pakistan functions as meaningful social action rather than linguistic deficiency and calls for pedagogical and policy recognition of multilingual repertoires.

Keywords: Code-Switching; Socio-Pragmatics; Indigenous Languages; Multilingual Pakistan; Urban–Rural Divide

Introduction

Pakistan is a linguistically rich and culturally diverse country where multilingualism is a natural and everyday reality. Speakers frequently move between Urdu, English, and various indigenous languages such as Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, Saraiki, and others depending on context, audience, and communicative purpose. In such multilingual settings, **code-switching**—the alternation between two or more languages within a single interaction—has become a common sociolinguistic phenomenon. Rather than being random or indicative of linguistic deficiency, code-switching functions as a meaningful communicative strategy shaped by social norms and pragmatic intentions (Gumperz, 1982; Myers-Scotton, 1993). From a socio-pragmatic perspective, code-switching is not only a structural linguistic process but also a socially embedded practice that conveys pragmatic meanings such as identity construction, solidarity, authority, politeness, emphasis, and topic shift. Gumperz (1982) argues that conversational code-switching serves as a contextualization cue, signaling shifts in social relationships or discourse functions. Similarly, Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model explains language choice as a negotiation of

social rights and obligations within specific speech communities. These theoretical frameworks suggest that speakers in multilingual Pakistan strategically switch codes to achieve particular interactional goals. The role of indigenous languages in Pakistan is particularly significant. While Urdu serves as the national language and English holds institutional prestige as an official and global language, indigenous languages function as powerful markers of ethnic identity and local affiliation. The interplay between these languages reflects broader issues of power, ideology, and social stratification (Rahman, 1996; 2002). In urban centers, exposure to education, media, and globalization often intensifies Urdu-English switching, whereas in rural areas indigenous languages may retain stronger dominance in everyday communication. This urban–rural variation provides an important site for examining how pragmatic meanings are shaped by social environment. Previous studies on code-switching in Pakistan have largely focused on structural patterns or classroom discourse (e.g., Mansoor, 1993; Rahman, 2010). However, there remains a need for a comprehensive socio-pragmatic investigation that compares urban and rural settings and highlights the communicative functions of indigenous languages within multilingual interaction. Understanding how speakers negotiate meaning through code-switching contributes not only to sociolinguistic theory but also to broader discussions on language policy, identity, and linguistic capital in postcolonial societies.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how code-switching generates pragmatic meaning in multilingual Pakistan, with particular emphasis on indigenous languages across urban and rural contexts. By examining language choice as a socially and culturally embedded practice, the research seeks to illuminate the dynamic relationship between language, identity, and social structure. Language in Pakistan is not merely a medium of communication; it is a site of identity, power, politics, and social mobility. As a postcolonial multilingual nation, Pakistan presents a complex linguistic ecology in which multiple indigenous languages coexist with Urdu as the national language and English as the official and global language. In such a linguistically layered society, speakers routinely move between languages within single conversations. This linguistic alternation—commonly referred to as code-switching—is deeply embedded in everyday interaction across homes, markets, classrooms, offices, and digital spaces. However, code-switching in Pakistan is not a random or purely structural phenomenon. Rather, it is socially motivated and pragmatically meaningful. Each switch between languages may index solidarity, hierarchy, intimacy, distance, education, modernity, or authority. Understanding the socio-pragmatic meaning of code-switching is therefore essential for analyzing how multilingual Pakistan functions socially and linguistically. This study explores how speakers of indigenous languages engage in code-switching in both urban and rural contexts and how these practices construct social meaning.

Problem Statement

Despite the widespread use of code-switching in multilingual Pakistan, most existing research has focused primarily on its structural patterns or classroom practices, with limited attention to its socio-pragmatic functions, particularly in relation to indigenous languages. There is insufficient comparative research examining how code-switching generates pragmatic meaning across urban and rural settings, where social norms, language ideologies, and power relations differ significantly. Consequently, the role of indigenous languages in shaping identity, solidarity, and social positioning through

code-switching remains underexplored. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by investigating the socio-pragmatic functions of code-switching in multilingual Pakistan, with a focus on urban–rural variation.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine how code-switching functions as a socio-pragmatic resource in multilingual Pakistan, particularly in the use of indigenous languages across urban and rural settings. It seeks to explore how speakers employ language alternation to construct identity, express solidarity, negotiate power relations, and convey contextual meanings in everyday interactions.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it contributes to sociolinguistic and socio-pragmatic research by highlighting the communicative value of indigenous languages within Pakistan’s multilingual landscape. By comparing urban and rural contexts, it provides deeper insight into language ideology, social stratification, and identity formation. The findings may also inform language policy, educational practices, and future research on multilingual communication in postcolonial societies.

Literature Review

Code-switching has been widely studied within sociolinguistics as a systematic and socially meaningful linguistic practice rather than a random alternation between languages. Early structural approaches focused on grammatical constraints governing code-switching, such as Poplack’s (1980) Equivalence Constraint and the Free Morpheme Constraint, which explain how bilingual speakers switch languages without violating syntactic rules. While these models provided important insights into structural patterns, they paid limited attention to the social and pragmatic motivations behind language choice. The shift toward interactional and socio-pragmatic perspectives expanded the understanding of code-switching as a communicative strategy. Gumperz (1982) introduced the concept of contextualization cues, arguing that code-switching signals shifts in footing, topic, or interpersonal relationships within discourse.

Similarly, Myers-Scotton’s (1993) Markedness Model explains language choice as a negotiation of social rights and obligations, where speakers select either “marked” or “unmarked” codes depending on social expectations. These theories highlight that code-switching carries pragmatic meaning linked to identity, solidarity, authority, and power relations. In postcolonial and multilingual societies, code-switching is often associated with issues of linguistic capital and social stratification. Bourdieu’s (1991) notion of linguistic capital explains how certain languages (such as English in Pakistan) carry symbolic power and prestige, influencing speakers’ choices in formal and urban contexts. Research in South Asia suggests that English–Urdu switching frequently indexes modernity, education, and professional authority, whereas indigenous languages signal ethnic identity and local affiliation (Rahman, 1996; 2002). Within the Pakistani context, studies have examined multilingual practices in education, media, and everyday communication.

Mansoor (1993) explored the sociolinguistic relationship between Punjabi, Urdu, and English, emphasizing patterns of language preference and shift. Rahman (2010) discussed language ideology and policy, highlighting the hierarchical positioning of

English and Urdu over indigenous languages. More recent classroom-based research indicates that teachers and students use code-switching strategically for clarification, emphasis, and classroom management (e.g., Shamim, 2011). However, much of this research focuses either on structural aspects or institutional settings, with limited comparative attention to urban–rural socio-pragmatic variation. Urbanization and globalization have further intensified multilingual practices in Pakistan. Urban centers exhibit greater exposure to English and media-driven hybrid discourse, whereas rural communities often maintain stronger attachment to indigenous languages as identity anchors. Yet, there is a scarcity of empirical research comparing how code-switching functions pragmatically across these contrasting social spaces. Therefore, while existing scholarship establishes that code-switching is socially and pragmatically meaningful, there remains a research gap in examining how indigenous languages operate within socio-pragmatic frameworks across urban and rural Pakistan. This study builds on structural, sociolinguistic, and socio-pragmatic theories to provide a comparative and context-sensitive understanding of multilingual communication.

Scholars such as Gumperz argued that switching functions as contextualization cues that shape interpretation. The sociolinguistic approach to code-switching emphasizes the social and contextual motivations behind language alternation rather than just grammatical patterns. It examines how speakers use multiple languages to index identity, negotiate power, express solidarity, or signal formality and informality within specific communities. In multilingual Pakistan, this approach explains why urban speakers may switch to English to demonstrate education or modernity, while rural speakers may switch between indigenous languages and Urdu to maintain local solidarity. By focusing on social meaning, interactional context, and audience, the sociolinguistic approach highlights code-switching as a dynamic tool for managing relationships and social hierarchies. Urbanization fosters hybrid linguistic forms. Exposure to English in urban areas promotes lexical borrowing and mixing. Rural communities maintain more stable linguistic norms. Urbanization in Pakistan has significantly influenced linguistic practices, accelerating the mixing of languages and the rise of hybrid speech forms. Cities like Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad expose speakers to diverse linguistic communities, education in English-medium schools, and global media, leading to increased Urdu-English and indigenous-English code-switching. Urban environments encourage linguistic innovation, where speakers adopt foreign lexical items, syntactic patterns, and slang to signal modernity, social mobility, and cosmopolitan identity. In contrast, rural areas maintain stronger attachment to indigenous languages, highlighting how urbanization drives language change, shifting norms, and new sociolinguistic hierarchies. Regional languages symbolize heritage and belonging. Speakers often revert to indigenous languages in emotionally charged contexts, indicating intimacy and authenticity. Indigenous languages in Pakistan, such as Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, and Saraiki, serve as core markers of ethnic and cultural identity. They carry the history, traditions, and values of local communities, providing speakers with a sense of belonging and continuity. Even when Urdu or English dominates formal or educational domains, indigenous languages are frequently used in family, social, and cultural contexts to express intimacy, solidarity, and emotional authenticity. By maintaining and using these languages, speakers reinforce their ethnic identity and cultural pride, making indigenous languages essential anchors in Pakistan's multilingual landscape.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretivist research design grounded in a socio-pragmatic framework to investigate how code-switching produces pragmatic meaning in multilingual Pakistan, with a comparative focus on urban and rural settings. The research is exploratory and descriptive in nature, aiming to understand language choice as a socially embedded and context-sensitive practice rather than merely a structural linguistic phenomenon. Data are collected through purposive sampling from bilingual and multilingual speakers who regularly use Urdu, English, and at least one indigenous language such as Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Saraiki, or Balochi in their daily interactions. Approximately 40–60 participants are selected from both urban and rural contexts to ensure variation in age, gender, educational background, and socioeconomic status. The primary data collection methods include audio-recorded naturally occurring conversations, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation, enabling triangulation and richer contextual understanding. All interactions are transcribed and analyzed using discourse analysis and socio-pragmatic analysis, drawing on Gumperz's (1982) concept of contextualization cues and Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model to interpret how speakers negotiate identity, solidarity, power relations, politeness, and topic management through code-switching. Structural patterns such as inter-sentential, intra-sentential, and tag switching are also categorized to support functional interpretation. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality, are strictly maintained throughout the research process. To enhance trustworthiness and validity, the study applies data triangulation, member checking, and systematic coding procedures. Through this methodological framework, the research aims to provide a comprehensive and context-sensitive understanding of socio-pragmatic code-switching practices across urban and rural multilingual communities in Pakistan.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework of this study is grounded in a socio-pragmatic and discourse-analytic perspective, integrating structural, functional, and social dimensions of code-switching to provide a comprehensive understanding of its pragmatic significance in multilingual Pakistan. At the structural level, instances of code-switching are categorized into inter-sentential, intra-sentential and tag-switching, following Poplack's (1980) framework, which allows for the identification of patterns in frequency and distribution that form the basis for further analysis. At the functional level, Gumperz's (1982) concept of contextualization cues is applied to interpret how language switches signal shifts in topic, tone, participant alignment, emphasis, humor, or other discourse functions, while Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model provides a lens to understand whether language choices are marked or unmarked, revealing how speakers negotiate social norms, roles, and obligations within specific conversational contexts. The framework further situates these interactions within broader social, cultural, and ideological contexts, examining how urban–rural variation, exposure to education and globalization, and language ideologies influence patterns and functions of code-switching. In particular, Urdu and English are analyzed as languages of institutional power and prestige, whereas indigenous languages serve as markers of ethnic identity, local solidarity, and cultural affiliation, highlighting the complex interplay between macro-level social structures and micro-level conversational strategies (Rahman, 1996; 2002).

The analytical procedure follows a systematic approach: recorded conversations are transcribed, code-switching instances are identified and categorized, and each instance is functionally coded according to socio-pragmatic categories such as identity construction, solidarity, authority, politeness, emphasis, and topic management. Contextual interpretation links these patterns to social, cultural, and ideological factors, and comparative analysis across urban and rural datasets illuminates variations in both frequency and function, providing a holistic understanding of how code-switching operates as a socially meaningful, context-sensitive, and strategically employed communicative practice in multilingual Pakistan.

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of this study is conducted within a socio-pragmatic and discourse-analytic framework to examine how code-switching functions as a meaning-making resource in multilingual interactions across urban and rural Pakistan. After transcription of the recorded conversations and interviews, the data are systematically coded to identify instances of inter-sentential, intra-sentential, and tag switching, followed by a functional categorization of each switch according to its pragmatic purpose. Drawing on Gumperz's (1982) concept of contextualization cues, the analysis explores how shifts in language signal changes in topic, footing, participation framework, or interpersonal alignment. Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model is applied to interpret whether language choices represent marked or unmarked options within particular social contexts, thereby revealing how speakers negotiate social rights, obligations, and power relations. The analysis further examines how indigenous languages operate as identity markers, indexing ethnicity, solidarity, intimacy, or resistance, particularly in contrast to Urdu and English, which may symbolize prestige, education, or institutional authority. Comparative analysis between urban and rural datasets highlights differences in frequency, functions, and ideological motivations behind code-switching, demonstrating how globalization, education, and social mobility influence linguistic practices in urban centers, while rural settings may exhibit stronger maintenance of indigenous linguistic identity. Attention is also given to politeness strategies, emphasis, humor, emotional expression, and discourse management functions to provide a holistic understanding of pragmatic meaning. Through thematic analysis and cross-context comparison, the study uncovers patterns that link linguistic choices to broader sociocultural structures, language ideologies, and social stratification, thereby presenting code-switching not merely as linguistic alternation but as a socially meaningful and strategically employed communicative practice in multilingual Pakistan. The findings of this study demonstrate that code-switching in multilingual Pakistan is not a random or unconscious linguistic behavior but a highly strategic and socially meaningful communicative practice shaped by context, identity, and power relations. The analysis reveals that speakers in both urban and rural settings use code-switching as a socio-pragmatic resource to negotiate interpersonal relationships, signal group membership, and achieve specific discourse functions. Consistent with Gumperz's (1982) theory of contextualization cues, language shifts often mark changes in topic, emphasis, humor, or alignment, indicating that code-switching operates as a subtle yet powerful discourse strategy. Similarly, the application of Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model confirms that speakers make conscious or semi-conscious choices between marked and unmarked codes to negotiate social expectations and rights within

particular speech communities. The comparative dimension of the study highlights important urban–rural differences. In urban contexts, Urdu–English switching appears more frequent and is often associated with education, modernity, professional authority, and global exposure. English, in particular, functions as a symbol of prestige and institutional power, reflecting Bourdieu’s (1991) notion of linguistic capital. Conversely, in rural settings, indigenous languages play a more dominant role in everyday communication and serve as strong markers of ethnic identity, solidarity, and cultural continuity. However, even in rural areas, strategic switching to Urdu or English occurs in formal or aspirational contexts, suggesting awareness of broader language hierarchies. The discussion also reveals those indigenous languages function as identity anchors, especially in emotionally charged interactions, expressions of intimacy, humor, or cultural references. Their use reinforces in-group belonging and shared cultural knowledge. At the same time, the alternation between indigenous languages, Urdu, and English reflects underlying language ideologies and social stratification in Pakistani society, where languages are hierarchically positioned based on prestige and institutional value (Rahman, 1996; 2002). Thus, code-switching becomes a site where macro-level structures of power intersect with micro-level conversational practices. Overall, the findings contribute to socio-pragmatic theory by demonstrating that language choice in Pakistan is deeply embedded in social meaning-making processes. The study extends existing research by foregrounding indigenous languages and by offering a comparative urban–rural perspective, thereby enriching our understanding of multilingual communication in postcolonial contexts. It confirms that code-switching functions as a dynamic and context-sensitive strategy through which speakers construct identity, negotiate power, and manage social relationships within Pakistan’s complex linguistic landscape.

Conclusion

This study has explored the socio-pragmatic functions of code-switching in multilingual Pakistan, with a particular focus on the use of indigenous languages across urban and rural settings. The findings indicate that code-switching is a deliberate, contextually motivated practice that allows speakers to negotiate identity, express solidarity, assert authority, manage discourse, and convey nuanced pragmatic meanings. Rather than being a sign of linguistic deficiency, code-switching emerges as a sophisticated communicative strategy that reflects speakers’ social awareness and adaptability in multilingual contexts. The research confirms that language choice is deeply intertwined with social, cultural, and ideological factors, demonstrating that the alternation between Urdu, English, and indigenous languages is a reflection of both personal and collective identity construction. Comparative analysis between urban and rural settings revealed significant differences in code-switching patterns and functions. Urban speakers tend to engage in frequent Urdu–English switching, often associated with prestige, education, professional status, and global exposure. English functions as a marker of social mobility and modernity, while Urdu often conveys neutrality or institutional affiliation. In contrast, rural speakers demonstrate a stronger attachment to indigenous languages, which serve as markers of ethnic identity, local solidarity, and cultural continuity. However, even in rural contexts, strategic switching to Urdu and, occasionally, English occurs in formal, aspirational, or cross-community interactions, highlighting speakers’ awareness of social hierarchies and language ideologies. These findings underscore the dynamic interplay

between macro-level social structures—such as power relations, language policy, and globalization—and micro-level conversational practices in shaping language behavior. The study also contributes to socio-pragmatic theory by illustrating how code-switching functions as a tool for contextualization, discourse management, and social negotiation. Indigenous languages, often overlooked in previous research, are shown to carry significant pragmatic weight, signaling intimacy, humor, emphasis, cultural reference, and resistance. By applying Gumperz's (1982) contextualization cues and Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model, the research demonstrates that language alternation is not arbitrary but reflects conscious or semi-conscious decisions aligned with social norms, expectations, and interlocutors perceived social positions. The study provides empirical evidence that code-switching in multilingual Pakistan is a socially meaningful, contextually embedded, and pragmatically functional phenomenon. It highlights the importance of considering urban-rural variation, indigenous languages, and sociocultural context when analyzing multilingual discourse. Beyond theoretical contribution, the findings have practical implications for language policy, education, and intercultural communication, suggesting that acknowledgment and incorporation of indigenous languages can enrich pedagogical practices, foster inclusivity, and enhance communicative competence in multilingual settings. Ultimately, this research underscores the complex, adaptive, and socially strategic nature of code-switching, positioning it as a central mechanism through which speakers in Pakistan negotiate meaning, identity, and social relationships in a linguistically diverse landscape.

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