

Pakistani Bilingual Undergraduate Students' Language Preferences on Social Media

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Abstract

Without any exception, Pakistani undergraduate students are bilinguals. They start learning both Urdu and English from primary level. Although Urdu is the national language of the country, English is predominantly used in top bureaucracy, judiciary and all the competitive exams. Hence, there is a need for the students to be competent in both the languages. The outburst of social media and the availability of both these languages on the social media platforms mean that people can use either of the two languages. This exploratory study aimed at exploring the language preferences of Pakistani bilingual undergraduate students, both male and female, on social media. The study was qualitative in nature and employed semi-structured interviews as research tools. The students were asked a range of questions on themes like their preferred language, script, the reasons behind preferring one language over the other, the language preference of the people in their friend lists, and the resultant communication gap, if any. The interview data was then triangulated with the Facebook posts of the same students for the sake of cross validation. The findings suggest that although there are some differences in the language preferences of male and female students, the reasons are similar. While some of the students prefer Urdu over English due to ideological reasons, others do so because they believe it will be easier for them to communicate with the friends. Meanwhile, those preferring English over Urdu report that they do so because they want to practice writing English since it is an international lingua franca and with its help they can reach out to more and more people throughout the world.

Keywords: Bilingualism, Computer-mediated Communication, Online Ethnography

Introduction

It is commonly believed that no discipline provides such a large plethora of constituent fields and subfields as does the study of language. One of the fundamental reasons behind it is that language is the dominant mode of communication among humans, and all the disciplines rely on it in varying degrees. Great many languages are spoken the world over. According to Ethnologue though the number keeps on changing, the total number of languages spoken in the world stands at 7,097 today. However, out of such a large number, 23 languages are spoken by more than half of the human population. There are some countries in which dozens, even hundreds, of languages are spoken. It is but natural for these countries to have bilinguals or multilinguals. In fact, multilingualism has emerged as a necessity throughout

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the world.¹ Bilingualism can be loosely defined as the reasonable competence to use two languages in their particular social contexts, whether this competence in both the languages is equal or not is debatable.²

Mass international communication and spread of information technology mean access to, and sometimes need for learning, additional languages for a vast number of people.³ This, thus, has political ramifications as well. Since English has a status of the global language, its education in addition to that of the native languages results in national political as well as international implications.⁴ In addition, various psychological and cultural variables are also involved in the phenomenon of bilingualism.⁵

Social media has become an addictive enterprise, and its infiltration in our daily lives is well established.⁶ In the beginning, the only language available at social media platforms was English; however, the users can post in several languages today. Nevertheless, for the bilinguals, this facility can not only be an opportunity but also a challenge as it can result in the issues as serious as those of national identity.⁷ Although the phenomenon of bilingualism and multilingualism has been researched extensively, these terms have recently acquired a new dimension in case of the computer-mediated communication (CMC).

Androutsopoulos (2013) coined the term networked multilingualism in order to integrate research in CMC and multilingualism. By networked multilingualism, Androutsopoulos means that the digital connection of the social media user to others is interrelated with his/her presence in the network. The term relates to all the linguistic activities of the users when they

¹ Romaine, S. Multilingualism, in M. Aronoff & J. Rees-Miller eds. *The handbook of linguistics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.

² Brisk, M. E., & Harrington, M. M. *Literacy and bilingualism: A Handbook for all Teachers*. Routledge, 2010.

³ Jaumont, F. *The Bilingual Revolution: The Future of Education is in two Languages* Vol. 1. TBR Books, 2017.

⁴ Pennycook, A. *The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language*, Routledge, 2017.

⁵ Chen, S. X. Toward a Social Psychology Of Bilingualism and Biculturalism. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 181, 2015, pp. 1-11.

⁶ Perrin, A. Social Media Usage, *Pew Research Center*, 2015, pp.52-68.

⁷ Dressler, R., & Dressler, A. Linguistic Identity Positioning In Facebook Posts during Second Language Study Abroad: One Teen's Language Use, Experience, and Awareness, *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics/Revue Canadienne de Linguistique appliquée*, 192, 2016, pp. 22-43

are engaged in writing, through digital technologies, things that are read by the audiences who are also connected through that network.⁸

Even today, English is one of the most dominant languages on the internet because not only the native speakers of English but also the bilinguals having some proficiency in English use it. This is especially so in countries of the Subcontinent including Pakistan where English remains the primary official languages despite the region's independence from the British rule some 70 years ago. This is not to say that there is any dearth of languages in the country. On the contrary, it is home to more than 60 indigenous languages with some of them on the verge of extinction due to several social factors. Very few of these local languages are taught at schools.

The power and prestige associated with English,⁹ at the expense of the local languages, has remained one of the reasons why English has sustained this position for such a long time in this country. Due to the same prestige and power, it has also become one of the stratification mediums.¹⁰ As far as Urdu, which is the national language of the country, is concerned, not more than 7.75% Pakistanis can claim it as their mother tongue; however, it is also a compulsory language in schools and is widely used in the cities.¹¹ Even if a student has studied just the primary level in the government schools, s/he will have enough exposure in Urdu to read, write and speak the language fluently. People use English and Urdu not merely for the sake of communication but also because these are identity markers. The more powerful the language you use, the more powerful you consider yourself to be and an increased level of self-esteem you are likely to have.

As in the rest of the world, social media is widely used in Pakistan. Smart phone technology has made it possible for people to be part of social media networks all the time. Undergraduate students, in their teenage and early 20s, are using social media not only for social networking but also for educational purposes¹² as far as development of language skills is concerned.

⁸ Androutsopoulos, J. Networked multilingualism: Some language practices on Facebook and their implications. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 192, 2015, pp.185-205.

⁹ Rahman, T. *Language Policy and Localization in Pakistan: Proposal for A Paradigmatic Shift*, 2004. Retrieved March 12, 2018 from <http://www.elda.org/en/proj/scalla/SCALLA2004/rahman.pdf>.

¹⁰ Government of Pakistan, *National Education Policy*, Education Planning Commission, 2009.

¹¹ Rahman, T. Language Ideology, Identity and Commodification Language in the Call Centers of Pakistan, *Language in Society*, 38, 2009, pp. 1-26

¹² Zheng, B., Yim, S., & Warschauer, M. Social Media in the Writing Classroom and Beyond, *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.2018.

Although there have been several studies on the language preferences of students in Pakistan,^{13,14,15,16,17} there has been no considerable research either on language patterns or language choices of the bilingual undergraduate students at social media in Pakistan. The present study aims to fill the same gap.

Method

Earlier studies in multilingualism and its different facets mainly drew upon face-to-face data collection procedures and methods. However, since the modes of communication have changed now due to the availability of CMC, there is also a shift in the data collection procedures to better understand the language use. CMC affords immense opportunity and huge challenge for language data collection and analysis because of the sheer mass of data available on the internet.

Several approaches and methods have been proposed to study language use on social media platforms.¹⁸ Some researchers even consider the CMC corpora as the "naughty child of text and speech corpora"¹⁹ One of the methods is using the data mining tools while there are also calls for using a mixed method design in which data mining is integrated with multimodal analysis.²⁰ However, these methods do not serve the purpose of the present study. For the purpose of this study, as Barton and Lee (2013) suggest, there

¹³ Mansoor, S. Punjabi, Urdu, *English in Pakistan: A Sociolinguistic Study*, Vanguard, 1993.

¹⁴ Manan, S. A., Dumanig, F. P., & David, M. K. The English-Medium Fever in Pakistan: Analyzing Policy, Perceptions and Practices through Additive Bi/Multilingual Education Lens. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 206, 2017, pp. 736-752.

¹⁵ Mahboob, A. English Medium Instruction in Higher Education in Pakistan: Policies, Perceptions, Problems, and Possibilities, in *English Medium Instruction in Higher Education in Asia-Pacific* Springer, Cham, 2017, pp. 71-91.

¹⁶ Manan, S. A., David, M. K., Dumanig, F. P., & Channa, L. A. The glocalization of English in the Pakistan Linguistic Landscape, *World Englishes*, 364, 2017, pp. 645-665.

¹⁷ Panhwar, F. Y. A. N. *Multilingualism in Sindh, Pakistan: The Functions of Code-Switching Used by Educated, Multilingual Sindhi Women and the Factors Driving its Use*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Sussex, 2018.

¹⁸ KhosraviNik M. Social Media Critical Discourse Studies SM-CDS, In: John Flowerdew and John Richardson, *Handbook of Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Routledge, 2017, pp. 582-596.

¹⁹ Ljubešić, N., Lungen, H., & Poudat, C. *Integrating Corpora of Computer-Mediated Communication Into the Language Resources Landscape: Initiatives and Best Practices From French, German, Italian and Slovenian projects*, 2016.

²⁰ O'Halloran, K. L., Tan, S., Pham, D. S., Bateman, J., & Vande Moere, A. A Digital Mixed Methods Research Design: Integrating Multimodal Analysis with Data Mining and Information Visualization for Big Data Analytics, *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 121, 2018, pp. 11-30.

is a need not only to observe the language use but also to get in touch with the users to find out their purpose in writing online. Hence, this study employed online ethnography approach for data collection.²¹ Online ethnography was first introduced by Androutsopoulos (2008) who called for triangulation of available "online discourse with direct contact with its social actors".²²

The study was qualitative in nature and employed semi-structured interviews as research tools. The students were asked a range of questions on themes like their preferred language, script, the reasons behind preferring one language over the other, the language preference of the people in their friend lists, and the resultant communication gap, if any. The interview data was then triangulated with the Facebook posts of the same students for the sake of cross validation.

Participants

We collected data from 20 undergraduate bilinguals using Facebook. The students belonged to three universities in Pakistan. Their names have been replaced with the first 20 Greek alphabets to ensure anonymity. In addition, for the sake of anonymity and avoidance of harm, the participants' names have been erased from the screenshots of their Facebook posts.

Table 1: Participants

Name	Gender	Age	Facebook Friends	Status Updates
Alpha	Male	19	120	22
Beta	Male	19	1365	32
Gamma	Male	18	139	34
Delta	Male	20	560	18
Epsilon	Male	20	772	19
Zeta	Male	21	456	15
Eta	Male	20	321	29
Theta	Male	21	1797	39
Iota	Male	20	234	48
Kappa	Male	18	211	34
Lambda	Female	19	55	23
Mu	Female	20	134	11

²¹ Barton, D. & Lee, C. *Language Online: Investigating Digital Texts and Practices*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2013.

²² Androutsopoulos, J. *Potentials and Limitations of Discourse-Centred Online Ethnography*, *Language@ internet*, 58, 2008.

Nu	Female	20	49	10
Xi	Female	18	110	19
Omicron	Female	20	212	14
Pi	Female	20	37	17
Rho	Female	19	49	19
Sigma	Female	20	87	20
Tau	Female	18	93	14
Upsilon	Female	21	78	28

Results and Discussion

The following thematic categories emerged during interviews with the students and a review of their Facebook posts.

Roman Script or Perso-Arabic

English follows the Roman script whereas Urdu has Perso-Arabic script. All but one of the respondents reported using the Roman script. They said that it was easier to type in the Roman script than it is in the Urdu script. Iota was the only student who was comfortable in using the Urdu language as well as its script. This is in stark contrast with the theme of linguistic ideology and nationalism in which many of the respondents stated that they preferred Urdu over English due to ideological reasons. It is surprising because the PC keyboards as well as smart phones have the features available for composing the Urdu text. However, this may be due to the reason that these students have been typing English all along. Whenever they had to write Urdu, whether in school or in university, they preferred pens over computers.

Post: Apnay honay walay mian say bas chocolate chahti hoon

Meri Sadgi dekho main kia chahti hoon

(The only thing that I want from my future husband is chocolate)

(Look at my simplicity, what a simple thing I want)

A: diabetes ho jaey gi (It will result in diabetes)

Upsilon: bhai sahb! Nai hoti. Relax (Relax brother! Nothing of the sort will happen)

B: achi baat hay (That's a good thing)

C: kamal hay, aap kisi phairi walay say shadi karo gi? (Strange! Will you marry a vendor?)

D: Low level

E: Aur aapka kuch extra level hay shayad (You probably are on a higher level.)

Such a practice could have been termed quite usual in the past when the alternate scripts were not available for computer-mediated communication, and the "ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange), based on the Roman alphabet character set"²³ was the only option. However, as things stand, most of the commonly used scripts are available on PCs and smart phones.

Linguistic Identity and Nationalism

The importance of language in the study of nationality, identity and politics is well established.²⁴ Linguistic identity and nationalism play an important part in defining one's language choices. "I use Urdu because it is our national language" was the response by Alpha, Delta, Iota, Mu and Pi. Although none of these students could claim that Urdu was their first language, they identified it as their "own" language, and called for using it "unless someone does not understand what I am saying", as Delta put it. There was an appeal to the "educated elite" to work for promotion of the national language as it is an identity marker, side by side with learning and using English for international communication and acquisition of knowledge that is not available in the national language. This shows that although these students might speak their local languages, like Punjabi and Saraiki, they now own Urdu is their language. Figure 1 presents a post from Delta's timeline. He writes in the post: "All of us are Pakistanis. None of us is Sindhi, Balochi, Bengali, Pathan or Punjabi. We should be proud only of being Pakistanis." This very much explains the spirit of nationalism as Delta claimed in the interview. The interview with Delta also shows that the spirit of patriotism is inculcated through textbooks, and national media, in Urdu language.

²³Rivlina, A. Global English-Related Digraphia and Roman-Cyrillic Biscrptal Practices, *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 236, 2016, pp. 207-212.

²⁴ Josephe, J. E. Language and Identity: National, Ethnic, Religious, London: Palgrave, 2004.



Figure 1

Family and Religion Might be Exceptions

It was quite interesting that most of the participants in the study posted or shared things related to religion and family in Urdu, whether or not it was their preferred language on social media. See, for instance, Figure 2 taken from the timeline of Upsilon, whose preferred language is English. "The only thing I wish is to keep going hand in hand with my father", she shares. Figure 3 has been taken from Tau's timeline. It is a prayer, which reads, "May God, who loves us more than 70 mothers, grant long and healthy life to every father and mother." As far as the posts on religion are concerned, the use of Urdu might be due to the fact that people want to spread such messages across to more and more people. Another reason could be the desire to appear religious. In addition, the students get more exposure in Urdu at schools, and are also taught Islamic studies in Urdu. It might be easier for them to relate these feelings in Urdu. Another interesting, and no less important, aspect is that of the comments on these posts. Almost invariably, the comments are in Urdu. Even if there is an English comment, it is a word or phrase like "Amen", "cute" or "true saying". This is equally true of the English majors.



Jokes and Funny Posts

Jokes and funny posts are shared in both the languages equally. Even those who prefer using Urdu on social media sometimes share posts in English. In the same way, those for whom English is the preferred language, also share jokes in Urdu. Meanwhile, there are others who will mix the code. Figure 4 shows the image shared by Kappa who reported during the interview that he prefers using English over Urdu. The title of the post, "Kasam sey!", means "By God". The post is a screen shot from Twitter and it reads, "Those having a unique name spend half of their lives telling people, 'this isn't how you pronounce my name', and this is not how you spell my name."



Local Communication Needs

Humans employ language, primarily, for communicative purposes. There was a realization among some of the respondents that they have to use Urdu so that most of their friends could get their message. After all, it is social networking, and an awareness of the needs of the people in one's network goes a long way in developing better and stronger social networking. Nu, Zeta and Eta were of the view that since people in their network could not comprehend the messages and posts in English, it was but natural for them to switch to Urdu. This is the category of bilinguals that we can call as flexibly networked multilingual. In addition, the number of likes and comments for posts in Urdu were also greater than those in English. This confirms the view of Nu, Zeta and Eta.

In sharp contrast to it, Upsilon, while conceding that "most of the people in our social circles do not understand this language really well", says that the friends "understand the common sentences and simple English that I use". This also shows some form of flexibility on her part in that there is a realization that the syntax as well as vocabulary has to be adjusted in order to put the message across. Nevertheless, it was observed during systematic observation of Facebook post that the students mixed codes in order to put their message across. It is quite a common practice to insert a couple of English words while writing Urdu. A conversation on one of the posts by Theta is reproduced to below to elaborate this point.

English as a Status Marker

"Sometimes, I use English despite the fact that I know that most of the people in my friend list will not understand it because I am educated and they are not". It might seem funny but it is true. English is a status marker and is used as a symbol of social stratification in the country. Using a powerful language means you belong to a privileged and powerful class.²⁵ It is good even if you use a couple of words, or a phrase, of English while using Urdu. It is widely held that using English helps because it ensures upward mobility.^{26,27}

Sigma's reasons go a step further when he says, "English is easier to write, and maintains manners in talking. Sometimes, people lose the manners while talking in Urdu like abusive language" [sic]. This confirms Rahman's

²⁵ Rahman, 2004, op. cit

²⁶ Ahn, S. Y., & Kang, H. S. South Korean University Students' Perceptions of Different English Varieties and their Contribution to the Learning of English as a Foreign Language, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 388, 2017, pp.712-725.

²⁷ Rahman, 2009, op.cit

claim that language desertion takes place due to the inferiority complex arising from sense of backwardness and shame.²⁸ The sense of inferiority, due to which the speakers desert their minority languages in favor of the more privileged and powerful languages, can be witnessed here as well. The negative attitude toward Urdu speakers, terming them as losing manners and use swear words clearly suggests indigenous language desertion in favor of English.

It did not come as a surprise that the students of law, medicine, engineering and English literature were more confident in using English on Facebook. Most of them frequently posted things in English. However, with only a few exceptions, they replied to Urdu comments in Urdu even if in the Roman script. The exceptions included the students of English literature.

For instance, Omicron posted a picture of her niece with a subject line *mera payara bacha* (my beautiful baby). It received the following comments.

A: May no one cast an evil eye on her.

B: So cute!!

C: OMG! She is so beautiful.

D: O! She is a darling. Look at her eyes.

Here, it is quite evident that even though Omicron posted in Urdu, all the responses are in English. All the respondents here are the undergraduate English major students,

Conclusions

The importance of English as international language, and as language of education, prestige, power and technology is well established. Although other major languages are fast replacing the place once solely occupied by English on social media, English still remains the most used language. However, the study of Pakistani bilingual undergraduate students' language preferences shows that although many of them claim that they prefer English over Urdu in communication on Facebook, their choices depend largely on the issue at hand. If the posts are related to family or religion, they most frequently use Urdu. However, English is still used as a status marker even on social media. Some of the students prefer communicating in English but

²⁸ Rahman, T. *Language, Ideology and Power, Language Learning among the Muslims of Pakistan and North India*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002.

are left with no choice but to communicate in Urdu because they believe that the main function of language is communication.

The most interesting phenomenon that has emerged during the course of this study is the observation that even when the students share posts, or comment on the posts, in Urdu, they use the Roman script. This is despite the fact that Perso-Arabic script is available on keyboards as well as on the smart phones. There could be several psychological and sociological reasons behind that. There is a need to conduct a study to identify the reasons behind use of Roman script in writing Urdu on social media.