

## SWITCHING SELVES ONLINE: PASHTO-ENGLISH BILINGUALISM, IDENTITY, AND EXPRESSION IN PAKISTAN'S DIGITAL DISCOURSE

**Hafsa khan**

MPhil Scholar, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, KP, Pakistan.

Email: [hafsakhn2000@gmail.com](mailto:hafsakhn2000@gmail.com)

**Komal Ilyas**

MPhil Scholar, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, KP, Pakistan.

Email: [comal.elyas5@gmail.com](mailto:comal.elyas5@gmail.com)

**Haleema Mustamar**

MPhil Scholar, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, KP, Pakistan.

Email: [haleemamustamar8261@gmail.com](mailto:haleemamustamar8261@gmail.com)

**Corresponding mail:** [hafsakhn2000@gmail.com](mailto:hafsakhn2000@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*The language in modern digital realms goes beyond its message carrying center; it serves as a mirror of itself in identity, emotion, and cultural location. The current paper examines what happens when Pashto-English bilinguals in Pakistan negotiate using social media sources namely Facebook, Instagram, and X (formally Twitter): specifically focusing on written and typed forces of language use. With the help of the insights of the digital sociolinguistics, multimodal discourse analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, classic code-switching theory, this analysis illustrates how bilingual users using Pashto and English interlace each other strategically to enact selfhood and signal membership as a reaction to the affordance of different digital environments. After analyzing 300 accessible social media posts, one can find the evidence that code-switching is more than mechanic result of being a bilingual person: it is a conscious artistic choice. Contemporary English is often used as a platform of humour, accentuation, emotional dynamics and expanded social presence, in contrast, Pashto is the foundation of cultural and communal identity. The support allowed by devices like emojis, hashtags, and punctuation are not decorative but valuable resources in building meaning. The linguistic behaviour is also influenced by site-specific design: Instagram allows very English-oriented aesthetics; Facebook supports more locally-grounded bilingual communication; and X encourages very short and humorous messages. This means then that Pashto-English users are not engaged in passive juggler performances of their languages, but they are involved in some hybrid identities with impunity. These results can be used to clarify intricate bilingual sociolinguistic identity and emerging digital literacy among bilingual users in South Asia, which are relevant to educators, linguists, and platform developers as bilingual expression in the area proceeds to change.*

**Keywords:** Pashto-English code-switching, bilingual identity, digital discourse, social media, Pakistan, sociolinguistics

### Introduction

In a world that is becoming more and more digital, language elements that people use are changing at a high rate. Social media - once a fringe or marginalized of the sphere of activity has become a central position in interaction, identity development and cultural representation. In the case of multilingual groups, such online arenas become unique platforms where languages become mingled, intersected and at other times get conflicted. In these virtual spaces, language extends beyond its more conventional communicative role; it is the means of belonging, striving, protesting, and creation. This study explores one such phenomenon: how Pashto speakers in Pakistan blend English into their written communication on platforms like

Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter), and what these reveals about evolving linguistic practices, digital identities, and sociocultural positioning.

Pakistan is a linguistically diverse country, home to over 70 languages, with Pashto being one of the major regional languages spoken by over 40 million people, primarily in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and parts of Balochistan (Rahman, 2011). While Urdu serves as the national language and English functions as a co-official language with high prestige and institutional capital, regional languages such as Pashto continue to play a powerful role in shaping ethnic and cultural identity. However, in online spaces, these languages do not operate in isolation. The internet—especially social media—has become a key site where linguistic boundaries blur. Increasingly, users draw from multiple linguistic repertoires to navigate the demands of different audiences, purposes, and platforms.

One of the most prominent features of online discourse in multilingual settings is code-switching, broadly defined as the alternating use of two or more languages within a single communicative event (Myers-Scotton, 1993). While code-switching has been studied extensively in face-to-face interaction, its manifestation in digital written discourse is less understood—particularly in regional language contexts like Pashto. The few studies that do exist on Pashto-English code-switching (e.g., Khan et al., 2020; Ali et al., 2021) have primarily focused on spoken interaction or formal communication, often overlooking the dynamic and informal ways in which language is deployed in social media posts, captions, hashtags, and comments.

This gap is not trivial. Social media platforms differ from traditional forms of writing or speech in several important ways. First, they are asynchronous yet immediate, allowing users to craft messages that are both spontaneous and deliberate. Second, they are multimodal, incorporating not just text, but images, emojis, hashtags, GIFs, and hyperlinks—each with its own communicative function. Third, they are performative and public, where language is not merely about conveying information, but about crafting a persona, curating an identity, or making a statement. Within this context, the choice to use Pashto, English, or both is rarely neutral—it carries implications about education, modernity, group membership, humor, irony, and affect. In Pakistan, English continues to function as a powerful symbol of social mobility, education, and global belonging (Mahboob, 2009). For Pashto speakers—especially younger generations who are digitally active—English is often associated with cosmopolitanism, tech-savviness, and modern youth culture. Pashto, on the other hand, symbolizes ethnic pride, cultural heritage, and in some contexts, political resistance. The social media context has become an interesting argument in tracing how locals can and will deal with divided loyalties: to a place and to a more expansive flow of global culture. To the best of our knowledge there is very little literature that has registered the phenomenon of code-switching in language use such as in the domain of Urdu and English online, but relatively little has been recorded regarding the same shift in Pashto and English (Mansoor, 2013; Ahmad & Ali, 2014). Since Pashto is a politically and culturally unique community that exists throughout Pakistan, its use in virtual places warrants more attention. This kind of study sheds some light on how speakers can present hybrid identities, adjust to novel technological possibilities, and challenge or recreate current sociolinguistic stratifications via daily digital engagement.

Thus, the current research study examines the use of English by Pashto speakers in Pakistan in written communication via their social media by focusing explicitly on Facebook, Instagram, and X. The selection of these platforms could be explained by their high popularity among the Pakistani youth and the possibilities of textual and visual expression offered by the platforms. As opposed to video-focused apps, like TikTok, where verbal performance is prioritized, the text basis of the chosen circles creates an effective environment in which it is possible to analyze the phenomenon of code-switching in the written sphere.

The essay approaches the new area of digital sociolinguistics (Androutsopoulos, 2006, 2014) in the sense that it prioritizes platform-specific norms, audience awareness and mediated identities as an interpretation of online language use. To this it also appeals to the studies of multimodal discourse analysis (Kress, & van Leeuwen, 2001), who recognizes that digital written texts, however, are seldom mere wording sequences; however, they are continuously exerted by emojis, punctuations, typographical features as well as graphic elements that are not only meant to extend the semantics of writings. By combining these perspectives, the study aims to develop a nuanced understanding of how Pashto-English code-switching operates in social media contexts.

More specifically, the study investigates the following questions:

1. What are the patterns and frequency of English usage in the written social media posts of Pashto speakers in Pakistan?
2. What communicative functions does English serve in these bilingual or hybrid messages?
3. How do platform-specific features (e.g., hashtags, emojis, post formats) influence the nature of Pashto-English code-switching?
4. What do these practices reveal about the sociolinguistic identities, digital literacy, and cultural affiliations of Pashto-speaking users?

By focusing on the written, typed discourse of Pashto-English bilinguals, this research fills a gap in both regional and global sociolinguistic literature. It offers new insights into how digital technologies reshape linguistic boundaries and how speakers in the Global South—often overlooked in digital language studies—innovatively repurpose language in online interaction. The findings may also have pedagogical and policy implications: for instance, in the domains of language education, content moderation, and platform design, where understanding local language practices is essential for inclusive and culturally sensitive engagement.

In sum, this study argues that Pashto-English code-switching in digital written discourse is not a random or careless mixture of languages, but a patterned, purposeful, and often creative act. It is shaped by individual agency, social norms, platform affordances, and broader ideological currents. In capturing these dynamics, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how language lives, shifts, and adapts in our digitally mediated world—especially in contexts that have been traditionally understudied.

## Literature Review

### 1. Code-Switching in the Pakistani Context

#### 1.1. Pashto-English Code-Switching

Despite the existence of diverse linguistic environment such as Pakistan, there is limited empirical evidence on Pashto English code-switching in the context of the online spheres. However, some descriptive studies have started enlightening this language practice. One of the brightest is the study by Khan, Nazir, and Hamid (2021) that examined the English speaking by the Pashto speakers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The results they obtained pointed out education as the greatest variable that pushed change towards English. In the context of this paper, English was found to replacing 'the symbol of the modern or social capital', and Pashto remained the main means of emotional expression and unity. Therefore, Khan et al. reported that two languages showed a distinct lack of functioning between each other, but specific analysis of digital communication settings was not present.

The closest structural study is the one by Khan, Anees, and Rahman (2020), in which the authors utilized the model known as the Matrix Language Frame (MLF) in order to explain grammatical features of Pashto English code-switching. In their findings, English nouns and verbs are highly imbedded in Pashto sentences with insertional switching prevailing. This

syntactic vantage point lends itself useful perspective, but not a solution to how such patterning can become visible within digital discourse in the world, a context of language use that is not a tool of communication but a stage on which it is staged, in which use and meaning are mediated by the audience, platform, purpose determinants of active signification.

One of the significant gaps in these earlier studies is that they did not involve much examination on written digital practices especially those used in facebook, Instagram, and X. The research aims to fill this gap through the examination of why written digital discourse forms an exceptional space of identity construction and language negotiation among Pashto bilingual communities.

### **1.2. Urdu-English Code-Switching: A Broader Comparative Insight**

In the literature, most of the references have been made on Urdu English code switching in the English-dominant group in Pakistan. Researchers have been mainly focusing on print and internet media. Mahmood (2020) has evaluated fashion journalism and noted that English content in Urdu articles is strategic, and presents a message of prestige globalism, and professionalism. This observation is reflective of larger sociolinguistic patterns of attitude towards English in Pakistan.

Sultana et al. (2020) in another study of code-switching on Facebook took the Pakistani users as their target. Their findings showed that users embrace English as a prestigious language, as a creativity, humour, and as a detachment of emotions. However, the research was restricted to the Urdu - English users and did not talk about regional languages like Pashto. This gap begs an obvious question: how do bilingual/multi lingual individuals with non Urdu speaking backgrounds engage in similar digital practice?

When combined, these studies show that social media is dynamic in the sense that linguistic boundaries are not held rigidly and are defined by the identities, audience, and available platform functionality. That of a sizeable and culturally unique demographic group, the Pashto-speaking population, is also under-researched in this literature.

### **2. Code-Switching in Other Multilingual Digital Contexts**

The concept of Hindi-English code switching (much-maligned colloquially as Hinglish) has been causing quite a stir in the outside research on the subject. One of the most impressive studies is by Barman et al., (2014) which combined a large amount of tweets in Hindi- English and studied the language use by the users. The researchers discovered that better uses of code-switching have strategic purposes, they can be used to signal emphasis, sarcasm, or humor and therefore it is evident that speakers code change for more than lexical complementation; sociolinguistic purposes are also on the prowl.

On the one hand, though the research provides a solid methodological framework about how to build a corpus out of social media, on the other hand, it is rather minimally involved in the socio-political implications of code-switching. To give an example, there is no inquiry in the work into possible connections to linguistic shifting and the aspects of urban elitism or digital privilege these phenomena are mostly used in cross-examination, which would be invaluable in studying the Pakistani digital environment as well.

The same holds true in the Arab world in which interactions between Arabic and English were greatly examined through the Twitter. In a recent case, Alamri (2022) examined the tweets created by the students of King Khalid University and found that English is more commonly utilised to express the views on current topics, student life, and the world, whereas Arabic prevails when the cultural expressions and personal stories are to be shared. The study also presents the gender patterns: women are more inclined to the preference of the English codes in comparison with men, and it could be represented by different manners of digital socialization.



Although quite revealing, the research is limited by a rather specific demographic segment focused on Saudi university students and by the sole focus on textual sources of data. However, this study highlights the ambivalence of identity that bilingual users freely perform online, which can probably be observed among Pashto-English Twitter users too.

No less educative is the study of Tagalog-English code-switching in the Philippines, or, in other words, passages in Taglish. Bautista (2004) does not place this practice in a position of a deficit but rather a flexible resource, which can create creative expression or social alignment which, can also be validated with Dela Cruz and Roxas (2021) who examine Facebook posts, and found that users utilize code switching to seem humorous, unique, or cosmopolitan. According to the authors, code-switching is commonly presented by graphic means including emojis, writing style such as all caps or repeating letters, implying that code-switching is both lingual and paralingual process.

These empirical studies are what lends credence to what was carried out in our study because the role of multimodality and the acting of identity cannot be underscored.

Within the Latinx user communities in the United States, the use of Spanish-English code switching, commonly referred to as Spanglish, is rampant, especially on Facebook and Tik Tok platform. Callahan (2004) characterizes the process of code-switching in Spanish-English bilinguals as they associate themselves with peer groups, claim their cultural identity, or express belonging to an in-group, whereas Hill and Dovchin (2022) compare internet memes to find out that code-switching can help resist the tendencies of language conformity and express the ability to perform the cultural hybridity. Being a study which takes a diasporic context, though, these studies establish that digital bilingual behavior is seldom accidental; it is inextricably betrayed in identity politics as well as generations.

Collectively, these studies provide a large-scale diagram of digital bilingualism in the world, its strategic and identity-mediated character.

### 3. Theoretical Frameworks: Justification and Application

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, combining concepts from digital sociolinguistics, multimodal discourse analysis, and interactional sociolinguistics, selectively integrating the notion of situational vs. metaphorical code-switching.

- Digital Sociolinguistics, as articulated by Androutsopoulos (2006, 2014), is particularly relevant because it focuses on platform-specific norms, audience design, and the social semiotics of online language use. Since this study is grounded in social media texts, this framework allows us to explore how Pashto-English bilinguals adapt their code-switching to different digital environments.
- Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) enables us to move beyond words and examine how emojis, hashtags, and stylistic features contribute to meaning. In digitally mediated communication, these elements often carry emotional tone, irony, or alignment with global digital culture.
- Interactional Sociolinguistics, especially Gumperz's (1982) idea of contextualization cues, helps explain why bilingual users shift between languages in the middle of a post or comment—to frame jokes, signal topic shifts, or manage relationships.
- Lastly, Blom and Gumperz's (1972) distinction between situational and metaphorical code-switching will be used analytically, to interpret why code-switching occurs in particular moments. Is it because the topic changes (situational)? Or is the speaker conveying deeper emotional or ideological shifts (metaphorical)?

This combination of frameworks is not applied in a rigid manner, but rather as a flexible toolkit to help us understand how Pashto-English bilinguals construct meaning, navigate identity, and perform social roles in written digital communication.

#### 4. Need for the Present Study

Despite the growing body of research on digital code-switching across the globe, Pashto-English bilingual practices on social media have been largely overlooked. While studies have documented similar behaviors among Urdu-English users in Pakistan or Arabic-English users in the Middle East, Pashto speakers—who form a significant linguistic and cultural group—remain underrepresented in academic discourse.

Also, the majority of the available studies dwell on the use of spoken language or institutional setting as a classroom, whereas social media is a more modern and natural place of language in practice. The study of the ways Pashto speakers conduct English in the written sphere of online interactions does not only create a much-needed gap but also advances the arguments about multilingualism, identity, and language use in the digital context. This research, consequently, is not merely a tracking of linguistic decisions—it is recognition of how such a historically and culturally diverse group of people such as the Pashtuns is dealing with the linguistic character of their identity in a more worldly and computerized age.

#### Methodology

##### 1. Research Design

To explore the use of the code switching by the Pashto English bilinguals in the social media context, the current research embraced qualitative descriptive study design, which was chosen, due to its ability to measure the richness of linguistic behaviour under naturalistic conditions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This was not meant to be generalised, but rather, to secure a differentiated understanding of the processes and drivers of the phenomenon of language blending in particular digital settings. Digital sociolinguistics (Androutsopoulos, 2014), which informed the investigation and provide insight into how linguistic practices are configured by the platform, informed the investigation along with multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), where it is considered evident that communication sessions are multimodal in nature, consisting of various modal levels, such as emojis, punctuation symbols, and hashtags that have a meaning themselves. The interpretation of intentions and meanings behind linguistic shifts was further informed by interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982) and the situation of code switching in a situational and a metaphorical understanding of it (Blom & Gumperz, 1972).

##### 2. Data Collection

###### 2.1. Platforms and Sample

In this analysis, the researchers have used data collected on three large social-networking platforms, i.e., Facebook, Instagram, and X (Twitter), where the young community of Pashto speakers in Pakistan visits. To sample the written code-switching between Pashto and English, a purposive sampling procedure was used to sample the posts and comments that were publicly available and on which one could observe the written code-switching. According to the established ethical rules of digital research (Townsend & Wallace, 2016), all content that was displayed was available to all, so no privacy or sensitive information was shown. The final corpus of texts that is expected to consist of approximately 300 social-media texts selected, including status updates, comments, and tweet responses, as well as captions and comments on a variety of communicative purposes and subjects, such as memes, political discussions, and personal reflection.

##### 3. Data Analysis

Once the data was collected and anonymized, it was imported into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, for systematic coding. The analysis followed Saldaña's (2016) multi-cycle coding approach, moving from detailed coding of specific features to broader thematic insights.

###### 3.1. Stage 1 – Initial Coding

Each post or comment was read closely and coded using open coding, focusing on where and how Pashto-English switching occurred. We also coded for multimodal elements—like the use of emojis, images, capitalization, and punctuation—which often altered or enhanced the textual meaning.

Examples of codes included:

- Pashto-English noun insertion
- Hashtag code-switches
- Emoji as contextual cue
- Code-switch for joke/punchline

By the end of this stage, we had generated 96 initial codes that captured both linguistic and functional aspects of the data.

### 3.2. Stage 2 – Pattern Coding

Next, we began grouping these codes into pattern codes—that is, recurring communicative purposes or stylistic tendencies. For instance, we noticed that many users switched to English when:

- Trying to emphasize a point (“That’s what I’ve been saying!”)
- Soften an insult or disagreement
- Create humor or irony, especially through memes or sarcastic remarks

This resulted in 32 pattern codes, many of which revealed the social motivations behind switching—such as performing coolness, emotional distancing, or global affiliation.

### 3.3. Stage 3 – Categorization and Theme Development

The pattern codes were further grouped into 6 broader categories. These included:

- Linguistic Function (e.g., clarifying, emphasizing)
- Socio-Pragmatic Roles (e.g., showing affiliation, saving face)
- Platform Affordances (e.g., use of hashtags or post length)
- Stylistic Performance (e.g., meme formatting, punctuation)
- Cultural References (e.g., Bollywood or Western pop culture terms)
- Audience Awareness (e.g., English for wider reach, Pashto for in-group)

From these, four major themes emerged, which are detailed in the Findings section.

NVivo was instrumental throughout this process—not just for storing and organizing data, but for enabling comparison between platforms, identifying overlapping codes, and visualizing connections between codes and categories. The ability to tag, merge, and search within nodes made the analytic process traceable and transparent.

## 4. Ethical Considerations

Ethical rigor was maintained at every step of the research. As we dealt with publicly available social media data, we followed the British Association of Applied Linguistics (BAAL) guidelines for internet-mediated research and ensured:

- Only publicly visible data was included
- All usernames and identifying details were anonymized
- Posts were paraphrased or quoted in line with fair use principles
- The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the university’s ethics committee

No direct interaction with users occurred, and no private data (e.g., DMs, protected tweets) was accessed. The focus remained solely on naturally occurring, public digital discourse.

This comprehensive and ethically sound methodology positions the study to make a meaningful contribution to understanding how Pashto-English bilinguals use language creatively, performatively, and strategically in written digital communication. It bridges a gap in the literature by combining linguistic, multimodal, and social analyses of an underexplored speech community in the context of globalized digital culture.

## Findings

The data collected from Facebook, Instagram, and X revealed that Pashto-English code-switching is neither random nor rare—it is strategic, creative, and deeply tied to users' identities, purposes, and platform-specific habits. Across 300 posts and comments analyzed, we observed nuanced patterns that address the four guiding research questions of this study.

### 1. Patterns and Frequency of English Usage

Across all platforms, English appeared frequently and purposefully—especially in specific lexical categories such as technology, education, pop culture, emotions, and exclamations. In fact, in 64% of the posts, English words were used at least once, and in 38% of cases, English formed full clauses or entire sentences.

#### A. Intrasentential Switching as Dominant Pattern

The most common pattern was intrasentential code-switching—where Pashto and English were blended within a single sentence. Consider this tweet:

*“Zma yaw zra da but sometimes I feel like no one cares.”*  
(*“I have just one heart but sometimes I feel like no one cares.”*)

This fusion reflects a high comfort level with both languages and suggests that English is used to express emotional vulnerability, perhaps influenced by the broader expressive norms of digital English.

#### B. Lexical Borrowing and Routine Expressions

Users often defaulted to English for certain default phrases like:

- “Happy birthday,” “Congrats,” or “Miss you”
- Terms like “university,” “assignment,” “deadline,” “interview,” and “wifi”

These insertions often appear unmarked, suggesting that for many digital Pashto users, such switches are habitual and internalized rather than deliberate.

### 2. Communicative Functions of English in Hybrid Posts

The functional motivations behind code-switching were varied and often context-sensitive. We identified five dominant functions:

#### A. Emotional Amplification

English was frequently used to express emotion, especially when users felt vulnerable or excited. Posts like:

*“Khushal za yam but can’t explain how much I missed those days.”*

...used English to add emotional depth and universality to feelings that might feel more intimate or dramatic in English.

#### B. Humor and Irony

English phrases were often used for punchlines or sarcasm, especially in meme formats or playful posts. For example:

*“Mora wey uth, school ta za! And I’m like ‘Not today, Satan.’”*

Here, the shift from Pashto to a meme-inspired English phrase enhances the comedic delivery and connects the user to a wider internet-savvy culture.

#### C. Avoidance and Euphemism

In contexts involving taboo topics—like gender, politics, or religion—English was used to soften the impact:

*“Za naway dost aw she, but not that type. You know what I mean.”*

The user avoids spelling out implications in Pashto (where it may be more provocative) and instead uses English as a veil—a linguistic safety net to signal awareness without explicitness.

#### D. Prestige and Authority

English was also used to establish credibility or signal intellectual capital:

*“Ajmal is good in speeches, lekin presentation skills need improvement.”*

Here, the critique is softened and “professionalized” through English.



### ***E. Relatability and Belonging***

Switching to English also helped users align with certain peer groups. Phrases like “crush spotted,” “boss vibes,” or “feeling blessed” were popular—used to blend into global youth culture and project digital fluency.

### **3. Platform-Specific Features and Their Influence**

Each platform shaped code-switching behavior differently—not just in language, but in tone, purpose, and visual style.

#### ***A. Facebook: Local Conversations, Layered Expression***

Facebook users used Pashto for content and English for commentaries or reactions. In many posts, the main body was written in Pashto, but the first-person comment or caption under the post was in English:

*“Da Peshawar match da! Best moment of the week.”*

Here, the photo captures a local moment, but the English phrase adds enthusiasm or shareability beyond the local community.

#### ***B. Instagram: Global Aesthetics, English as Default***

Instagram users leaned heavily into English-dominant captions, even when the comment section was more bilingual. Hashtags were almost always in English—even when the post text wasn’t. A typical post:

 *“Throwback to the best chai spot in Peshawar 🌟 #TeaTime #CityVibes #DesiSoul”*

The mix of nostalgia, aesthetic filtering, and English hashtags reflects a desire to merge cultural authenticity with global aesthetics.

#### ***C. X (formerly Twitter): Brevity Meets Wit***

On X, users made deliberate word choices to maximize expressiveness under character constraints. Many tweets used English idioms at the end of Pashto messages to add punch:

*“Da halat crazy de. Literally, endgame.”*

The hashtag culture (#PashtoTwitter, #JustKidding, #YaarBatao) also encouraged code-switching for humor or trending participation. English was the vehicle for virality.

#### ***D. Emojis and Non-Textual Cues***

Across all platforms, users relied on emojis to complement, reinforce, or replace code-switched phrases:

- ❤️ was often paired with “I miss you” or “Za ta yad yam”
- 😏 accompanied sarcastic or ironic English lines
- 🙈 was often used to suggest “shy confession,” especially in posts mixing languages

These elements often carried emotional or communicative weight **equal to or greater than** the words themselves.

### **4. Sociolinguistic Identities, Digital Literacy, and Cultural Affiliations**

Perhaps the richest insight from the data was how code-switching revealed complex, fluid identities among Pashto-speaking users.

#### ***A. Layered Identities***

Users constructed identities that were simultaneously local and global, religious and secular, modest and expressive. Language choice reflected this negotiation:

*“Namaz okhatal dy, but vibes are low. Dua krla.”*

This post fuses spiritual practice (Pashto) with emotional transparency (English)—offering a modern hybrid persona grounded in tradition but open to global emotional vocabularies.

#### ***B. High Digital Fluency***

Although rural or conservative speakers of Pashto, in stereotypical view, in fact have high degree of digital literacy: being able to tag friends; embedding hashtags, adhering to platform conventions even toying with typography:

“Kha yam!!! But missing youuuu soooo bad 🍷🍷”

The use of stretched words, use of emoji, and code-mixed orthography demonstrate a profound knowledge of digital performativity.

### C. Cultural Bridging

Code switching between Pashto and English enabled users to take on the role of mediators between two cultures, without losing their ethnicity, but contributing to broader conversations. It was particularly evident in posts in which the users talked about political or social problems: “Da situation nafrat pa zra wrakawee. We deserve better. #PashtunsMatter”

These posts combine activist tone with personal anguish, framed for both resident audiences and external observers.

Table: 1 Summary of Findings in Light of Research Questions

Research Question	Addressed Through Findings On...
1. Patterns & Frequency	Intrasentential dominance; high English use in emotional, professional, or aesthetic contexts
2. Communicative Functions	Humor, politeness, identity marking, emotional transparency, peer alignment
3. Platform-Specific Features	Emoji/hashtag integration; Instagram-English captions; Facebook bilingual threads; X character economy
4. Sociolinguistic Insights	Hybrid identities, high digital literacy, bridging local-global affiliations

This colorful field of bilingual life on social media sites gives us quite a vivid image of the contemporary speaker of Pashto: and not of one who feels prisoners of two languages, but of one firmly and securely standing between the two. In their postings, they re-write the cultural expectations and voice a self, which is, simultaneously, unapologetically, Pashto and global.

### Discussion

This research was undertaken in a bid to comprehend how Pashto-English bilinguals in Pakistan engage in written digital discourse that guides them through language norms, identity, and platform norms. As the results show, code-switching in social media is not a matter of one language switch to another one method but rather an adept, expressive, and culturally infused activity mediated through a digitalized setting and social motive. To gain a proper perspective on this we now move on to the theoretical background through which this question occurred.

#### 1. Digital Sociolinguistics: Platforms as Linguistic Ecosystems

Drawing from Androutsopoulos' concept of digital sociolinguistics, it becomes clear that each platform (Facebook, Instagram, X) functions as its own linguistic ecosystem—not just enabling but actively shaping language practices. When users select the languages, they are doing so by making platform-aware linguistic choices about how they perceive their audience, what sort of formality should be used in the space, and what sort of identity they wish to convey.

The language use on Facebook is more community-based bilingualism. Pashto often dominates, anchoring users to their ethnic and regional identity, while English appears to “frame” their sentiments or extend their reach. For example, a user writing about a local event might express the core message in Pashto but add an English phrase like “Proud moment for all of us!”—as if placing a digital stamp of modernity or wider relevance on a locally grounded post.

Instagram, on the other hand, is ruled by aesthetics and visibility. It’s the visual platform of curation and performance—and the language reflects that. English captions, hashtags, and filters dominate, even when the sentiment or audience is primarily Pashto-speaking. Here,

code-switching feels less about communication and more about styling the self. It's about looking fluent, not just in English, but in platform culture.

On X (formerly Twitter), where brevity is king, language becomes economical and punchy. Users seem to rely on English for ready-made expressions—memes, trending phrases, idioms—to boost retweet ability or signal cultural literacy. Even deeply Pashto-rooted tweets end in English one-liners like *“pure savage”* or *“no chill”*. These aren't mere linguistic choices; they're cultural ones.

This confirms a key insight of digital sociolinguistics: language choice online is always filtered through platform architecture and audience awareness. Users are not just code-switching between languages—they're code-switching between *selves* depending on the digital room they're in.

## 2. Multimodal Discourse: Meaning Beyond Words

In a case whereby Pashto-English bilinguals are interacting online, their language may very seldom be linguistic. These emojis, hashtags, punctuation marks, formats of memes are all semiotically loaded. It is here that Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) is necessary. Our data is a testament to the argument by Kress & van Leeuwen that meaning in the digital setting is constructed in multi-modal fashion.

Take an example of a post such as:

*“Za okyam... 😊 but not really.”*

In this case, the ellipsis, the smiley face, and the English saying but not really form a multi-layered emotional remark that will be hard to render in one language or without some help on the visual side. The emoji is the paralinguistic hint that indicates the actual mood of the speaker whereas English helps with some distance or irony that Pashto may omit.

Similarly, hashtag usage follows platform conventions but also becomes part of meaning-making. Tags like #DesiVibes or #ChaiTime in an otherwise Pashto post invite the user into a wider cultural or linguistic conversation. They are socio-discursive gateways that open the post to broader visibility while preserving a trace of cultural specificity.

This convergence of text and visual symbols in shaping bilingual expression emphasizes that language use online is no longer just about grammar or syntax—it's about performance and aesthetic coherence.

## 3. Interactional Sociolinguistics: Language as Social Work

The concept of contextualization cues put forward by Gumperz is especially strong regarding why the users change languages in the middle of a sentence or a thread. The code-switch is not a random act, it is very frequently an indication: of a tone shift, a change in mood or rather a correction in the level of social math.

As in, in the post:

*“Za las da sa qismat ta dey... but I'm done pretending.”*

This accompanies the transition to English in which the tone becomes less intimate, and more of a cultural narcissism without any pretense of poeticizing. The English component, here, puts the emotional shift in context and perhaps removes the user of the emotional burden of the Pashto sentence. This type of switching is a social and psychological threshold mark - a fence between the inner feeling and the external statement.

In another case, a user might begin in English:

*“Best evening ever. Chai, dosti, aur full laughter.”*

Switching to Pashto/Urdu mid-sentence here reduces formality, signals intimacy, and draws the in-group closer. Through this, users perform relational work—including or excluding people based on linguistic access, while also modulating tone and meaning.

Interactional sociolinguistics helps us see these moments not as chaotic mixing but as interactional choreography—a dance of closeness, distancing, inclusion, irony, or pride. Code-switching is the music, and users are aware of the beat.

#### 4. Situational and Metaphorical Switching: The Why beneath the How

Finally, Blom and Gumperz's distinction between **situational** and **metaphorical code-switching** offers an interpretive lens into the deeper *why* behind these bilingual choices.

Situational switching was evident when users changed languages based on audience or topic. For example:

- Writing a birthday wish in English when addressing a wider audience
- Switching to Pashto when the topic became culturally sensitive or intimate
- Using English in public Instagram posts, but Pashto in DMs or comments

In contrast, metaphorical switching occurred when users changed languages not because the situation demanded it, but because the switch *added meaning*. A user tweeting:

*"Za tired yam. Mentally, emotionally, spiritually."*

...uses English metaphorically—to *dramatize* exhaustion, to connect to a mental health discourse not commonly talked about in Pashto, and to perform cultural fluency. This is not about necessity; it's about expressing something Pashto may not be equipped—or allowed—to express in that digital moment.

These findings show that English is not replacing Pashto, nor is Pashto resisting English. Instead, they are being used on an interchangeable basis with one another to perform dissimilar types of jobs—and in the same sentence, too. What ensues is a multi-layered, textured, and highly contemplative language practice that reflects the complicated existence of the young bilingual Pashto users, who have to stand in the middle of global and local streams simultaneously.

#### Tying It All Together: Language as Identity, Agency, and Art

This research finally brings to light the notion that written digital code-switching is an influential linguistic agency. It is not only about the skill in operating in two languages but also in moving through overlapping identities, emotional presentations, social statuses and online convention.

The reason why Pashto-English bilinguals are mixing up their languages is not a failure to express oneself, and to express oneself, one needs to be fluent in that language instead, they keep doing it in a deliberate, creative way with the language being a digital calligraphic paint stroke to fill their contexts with color of emotional expressions, viewpoints, humor, and establishments.

It can be a caption in meme written in English on the end of a nostalgic Pashto paragraph, a tweet whose sarcasm demands an international idiom, or Instagram post on which a major portion of the pics are written in English hashtags with the comment thread being loaded with Pashto, each of these switches does more telling than what appears on the surface. It states that: "I know where I come from. I know where I'm going. And I know how to speak both truths at once".

#### Conclusion

The current study looked into the issues of Pashto-English bilingual in Pakistan in situations when they utilize written electronic discourse in online sites like Facebook, Instagram, and X. The main goal was to explain how these people use this medium in order to express their views, make social contacts and develop their multiple, stratified identities. What we discovered was far more than a collection of language switches; it was a portrait of a generation using bilingualism as a social, cultural, and emotional toolkit.

We found that code-switching is not a linguistic accident—it is an intentional act of positioning. Young Pashto speakers are not simply shifting between two languages; they are curating identity, responding to digital cultures, and finding linguistic strategies to navigate multiple



worlds at once. Whether it's an Instagram caption in English with a Pashto punchline in the comments, or a Facebook post written in Pashto but ending with "*Proud to be who I am*", each instance is a digital fingerprint of who they are, who they are becoming, and who they are speaking to.

It was digital sociolinguistics that made us realise the way the platforms themselves alert the language choices- how Facebook encourages more shared Pashto discussion, whereas Instagram only wants pretty English. The analysis of discourse using a multimodal approach indicated that emojis, hashtags, and stylized punctuation are not those things that are attached to a language but form part of the message. Interactional sociolinguistics demonstrated that language is also used to create relationships- to change emotional states whether it is making a politeness, creating humor. Lastly, the metaphorical and situational code-switching lens brought to our minds the idea that code-switching is never without an aim, an emotion, a social gesture.

This is not simply a story about code-switching—it is a story about belonging, expression, and hybridity. It is a story about how language lives and evolves in the hands of users who are deeply aware of its power.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study offers the following recommendations:

#### 1. For Educators and Curriculum Designers

- Recognize the linguistic realities of bilingual youth and incorporate digital literacy and code-switching awareness into language education.
- Encourage reflective writing tasks that allow students to analyze and discuss their own code-switching habits and digital expressions.

#### 2. For Linguists and Researchers

- Expand research beyond classroom settings to include naturally occurring digital data, particularly among underrepresented bilingual communities like Pashto speakers.
- Explore gendered, regional, and diasporic differences in code-switching patterns to understand how identity, mobility, and access shape language use online.

#### 3. For Social Media Platforms and Designers

- Consider how platform architecture affects multilingual users, and design tools (e.g., bilingual caption prompts or hashtag suggestions) that support fluid linguistic expression.
- Promote content moderation that is context-aware and culturally sensitive, especially when code-mixed languages are involved.

#### 4. For Cultural Institutions and Policy-Makers

- Support initiatives that celebrate and document bilingual digital cultures, especially among marginalized or regional language communities like Pashto speakers.
- Promote policies that value code-switching as a sign of linguistic richness, not deficiency.

### Final Thoughts

Language is always more than just words. In the digital world, it becomes movement, style, performance, intimacy, and community. For Pashto-English bilinguals in Pakistan, writing online is an act of balancing histories and futures, tradition and trend, emotion and irony. And in that balance, they are building something new—not just bilingual posts, but bilingual selves, uniquely suited for the multilingual, multimodal, and multicultural world they inhabit.

This study hopes to be a small window into that evolving world. And perhaps, a reminder that when we look closely at the way people speak and write—especially when they blend, bend, and remix languages—we are looking at the future of communication itself.

## References

- Ahmad, R., & Ali, S. (2014). *Englishization in Pakistan: A case of creeping bilingualism*. *Language in India*, 14(1), 135–147. <http://www.languageinindia.com/jan2014/raheelbilingualism.pdf>
- Ali, S., Khan, S., & Shah, A. (2021). *English Code-switching among Pashto speakers in formal settings: A sociolinguistic analysis*. *Pakistan Journal of Language Studies*, 5(2), 45–62.
- Alamri, N. M. (2022, July 19). Arabic-English Code-Switching among KKU Students on Social Media “Twitter”. <https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/th.284>
- Androutsopoulos, J. (2006). Multilingualism, diaspora, and the Internet: Codes and identities on German-based diaspora websites 1. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 10(4), 520–547. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9841.2006.00291.x>
- Androutsopoulos, J. (2014). *Languageing when contexts collapse: Audience design in social networking*. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 4–5, 62–73. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2014.08.006>
- Barman, U., Das, A., Wagner, J., & Foster, J. (2014). *Code-mixing: A challenge for language identification in the language of social media*. In *Proceedings of The First Workshop on Computational Approaches to Code Switching* (pp. 13–23). Association for Computational Linguistics. <https://aclanthology.org/W14-3902/>
- Bautista, M. L. S. (2004). *Tagalog-English code switching as a mode of discourse*. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 5(2), 226–233. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03024960>
- Blom, J.-P., & Gumperz, J. J. (1972). *Social meaning in linguistic structures: Code-switching in Norway*. In J. J. Gumperz & D. Hymes (Eds.), *Directions in sociolinguistics* (pp. 407–434). Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Callahan, L. (2004). *Spanish/English codeswitching in a written corpus*. John Benjamins.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Dela Cruz, R. T., & Roxas, R. M. (2021). *Taglish and identity on Facebook: A study on Filipino millennials*. *Journal of Language and Cultural Education*, 9(2), 94–108. <https://doi.org/10.2478/jolace-2021-0018>
- Gumperz, J. J. (1982). *Discourse strategies*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hill, M., & Dovchin, S. (2022). *Digital Spanglish: Language ideologies and code-switching in internet memes*. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 26(1), 49–69. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12470>
- Khan, A. A., Anees, M., & Rahman, G. (2020). The Patterns of Code-Switching in Pashto-English Bilingual Data. *Global Social Sciences Review*, V(I), 123–133. [https://doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2020\(V-I\).13](https://doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2020(V-I).13)
- Khan, S., Nazir, M., & Hamid, A. (2021). *English usage and code-switching among Pashto speakers: A sociolinguistic study in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa*. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 5(1), 54–67. [https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2021\(5-I\)05](https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2021(5-I)05)
- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2001). *Multimodal discourse: The modes and media of contemporary communication*. Arnold.
- Mahboob, A. (2009). *English as an Islamic language: A case study of Pakistani English*. *World Englishes*, 28(2), 175–189. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-971X.2009.01583.x>
- Mansoor, S. (2013). *The impact of English on education policies in Pakistan*. In E. Erling & P. Seargeant (Eds.), *English and development* (pp. 241–255). Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781847699473-019>
- Myers-Scotton, C. (1993). *Social motivations for codeswitching: Evidence from Africa*. Oxford University Press.

- Rahman, T. (2011). *From Hindi to Urdu: A social and political history*. Oxford University Press.
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Saqib Mahmood, S. (2020). *English in Pakistani fashion journalism: A stylistic and semiotic analysis*. International Journal of English Linguistics, 10(1), 89–99.  
<https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v10n1p89>
- Sultana, S., Dovchin, S., & Pennycook, A. (2020). *Popular culture and translingual practice: Music, digital media and youth identities*. Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429025275>
- Townsend, L., & Wallace, C. (2016). *Social media research: A guide to ethics*. University of Aberdeen. [https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media\\_487729\\_smxx.pdf](https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_487729_smxx.pdf)