

WORDS OF BELONGING: THE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION THROUGH KINSHIP TERMS IN PAKISTANI ENGLISH

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Abstract

This article shows how kinship terms are used to identify oneself and address others in Pakistani English, focusing on how the words can be used by speakers to negotiate social relationships, express cultural values and provide the indication of identity. In a sociolinguistics, study of conversation data and interviews shows that the terms of kinship such as brother, sister, chachu, bhabhi and some others are employed to establish solidarity, to show respect and values and to indicate in-group membership. This qualitative study, applying the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), discusses the difficulties of language, culture and identity in Pakistani English and notes how these kinship terms are a significant resource to create and negotiate individual and social identity.

Keywords: Kinship expressions, address terms, identity markers, Politeness and respect, Social identities

Introduction

Language is the road map of a culture. It tells you where its people come from and where they are going (Brown R.M, 1988). Language is never a neutral or passive means of communication. It is social tool or a semiotic process, an active tool. It is negotiated and produced by society (Halliday, 1978). It is not an individual activity rather a product of society. Language is not only used to share ideas, feelings and emotions to others but to express relationships, values, power structures and cultural identities which is done in every speech community (Goffman, 1959). These terms not only shows the biological relations but also the cultural norms and values and employed as an effective markers of identity that are used to build up and mirrors interpersonal relations (Radcliffe-Brown, 1950).

The kinship terms are used every day in daily conversations like aunt, uncle, Mamu, Chacha, brother, sister etc. These terms are not only used with family members but also with friends, colleagues, shopkeepers, teacher, strangers etc. These are basically used to express relations and shows solidarity (Soomro, 2023). Indicatively, a young person will call an old man uncle who is not related to him or an old woman aunt shows respect and politeness (Qureshi, 2023).

These terms also reflect intimacy, unity and cultural belongings. These interactions use kinship terms in much more important dimension than their literal meanings; they define the relationship between social and place people in a given social context. This is peculiar to Pakistani English and it is an indication of collectivist orientation of society and community where social relationships often extend beyond the nuclear family and is manifested in language (Kanwal et al., 2025).

The application of kinship terms is also connected more broadly with more general debates in the areas of sociolinguistic and pragmatics. The fact that English language diffuses to more new sociocultural settings and doesn't exist by itself is not a new discovery of scholars in the domain of World Englishes (Kachru, 1992). In Pakistan, English has been assimilated with many others different local languages, cultural and communicative patterns. So, the local form of English has been formed. This localized variety includes the respect of old people, community orientation and cultural specific politeness strategies (Anwar, 2023). These strategies are applied not only in spoken language but also in written and digital communication, classrooms employment and media. As an illustration on social media like on Facebook, Instagram and many other platforms, influencers, seniors or strangers are often called as *bhai* or *baji* which shows how cultural norms can influence the use of language (Ramsha, 2024).

The Identity concept plays the major role in understanding the role of kinship terms. The identity is not a fixed or inherent but it is build, negotiated and performed with the help of language (Goffman, 1959). When we address someone as *uncle*, *bhai*, *baji*, *aunty*, we are not only choosing a vocabulary items but we are making a pragmatic and cultural choices that puts both us and the person we are addressing in a certain type of social relationships. An example of this is that addressing someone as *bhai*, *uncle* may show respect, formality and recognition of seniority. On the other hand, the absence of kinship terms shows or reflects distance, formality, or lack of closeness and proximity (Giles, 1973). Thus, these linguistic choices function as identity work that they refer to who we are, how other perceive us and how we want others to perceive us in social relations.

As Pakistan is a multilingual country, many different languages are spoken and understood in this country such as Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, Saraiki etc. (Bilal & Asghar, 2023). English is an official language and used in many different institutions like schools, government, law, media, business etc. (Trudgill, 2000). So, English in Pakistan is not same as in Britain and America. There are many different cultural norms or values and terms are embedded deeply in Pakistani English. This shows cultural values and norms. It is regionalized, the local words, grammatical structures and cultural phrases are often used by speakers in English conversations and create a language mixture. This creates a cultural continuity and linguistics innovation. It plays the indexical role that renders kinship terms such as fruitful field of linguistics analysis and particularly of the manner in which language reflects or indicates social relations and identity (Soomro, 2023).

Additionally, Kinship terms are also overlapping with politeness and face theories. Pakistani culture considers to being polite as a social harmony, respect and recognition of hierarchical relations (Kanwal et al., 2025). The strategies of deference and rapport building that is culturally suitable is the use of kinship terms. These words make someone feel familiar even in comparatively formal or public settings and adhere to the collectivist cultural orientation of the Pakistani society.

Moreover, the kinship forms are not just the features of speech, but also manifest themselves in the digital communication. They are used in online communication, even when persons are not familiar with each other. Even it is strategically applied to academic and professional settings to negotiate authority, show power relations, express respect, or establish a collaborative and friendly environment. This flexibility demonstrates how language is a mirror of society and culture and it can change with new contexts and other modes of communication.

Aims and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to investigate how kinship terms function as linguistic identity markers in Pakistani English, and to explore the ways in which speakers use these terms to express social relationships, cultural values, and interpersonal identities within different communicative contexts. Following are the main objectives of the study:

1. To identify the most commonly used kinship terms in Pakistani English across different social and regional groups
2. To examine how kinship terms are used to construct, negotiate, and display identity in everyday communication
3. To analyze the sociolinguistic functions of kinship terms in reflecting cultural norms, respect, hierarchy, intimacy, and social distance
4. To explore the influence of age, gender, social class, and cultural background on the use of kinship terms as identity markers
5. To understand how Pakistani English speakers adapt, modify, or hybridize kinship terms from Urdu and local languages to express cultural identity through English

Hypothesis

Hypothesis underlying the study are as follows:

- H1: People in Pakistan use kinship terms in English to show respect and build friendly relationships.
- H2: Different age groups in Pakistan use different kinship terms when speaking English.
- H3: Men and women in Pakistan use some kinship terms differently to express their identity.

Research Questions

The study focuses on the following specific questions:

1. What are the commonly used kinship terms in Pakistani English, and how do they differ across social and regional groups?
2. How do speakers of Pakistani English use kinship terms to construct and express personal and social identities?
3. What sociolinguistic functions do kinship terms perform in Pakistani English interactions (e.g., respect, solidarity, hierarchy, intimacy)?
4. How do variables such as age, gender, social class, and cultural background influence the use of kinship terms as identity markers?
5. In what ways do Pakistani English speakers borrow, adapt, or hybridize kinship terms from Urdu and other local languages to index cultural identity?

Literature Review

Language is not only used to share ideas and it is not only a neutral tool of communication. But it is a powerful medium of identity construction. In societies that are multilingual and culturally rich and diverse such as Pakistan, linguistics expressions tend to be pervasive of strong cultural values, social stratification and community practices (Halliday, 1978). The use of kinship

terms in day to day interactions is not only a literal but also the linguistics practices in this respect. This linguistic connotational practices becomes a hallmark of the Pakistani English language that indicates the relationship between language and identity in the postcolonial situation.

As Halliday's Social Semiotic process reflects that language is a mirror and product of society. It is not an individual activity rather it is negotiated and produced by society. He identified three modes of communication like Field, tenor and modes. That means language choices depends on specific choices according to its contexts like topic of communication, relations between speakers and medium of communication (Halliday, 1978). So language shows it's cultural and linguistic values and norms. Kinship terms are traditionally used to establish and describe family relations such as father, mother, brother, sister, uncle and aunt. This understanding may be theoretically supported by Ervin Goffman's work the presentation of self in everyday language, reflects that language is one of the elements of identity performance. Identity is not fixed but dynamically constructed through social interactions (Goffman, 1959).

Howard Giles accommodation theory also demonstrates that people adjust their speech styles or accommodate, as a means of expressing values, attitudes and intentions towards others. The identity terms in Pakistani English establishes a pseudo-kinship relationship indicating familiarity, trust and respect (Giles, 1973). Most notably, these terms are not translated in Pakistani English as they carry cultural values and implications. As a case in point, whereas the English word "aunt" is used to denote a given role in family. Aunt in Pakistani English means any older woman which is a way of showing courtesy as well as upholding a cultural values.

The model of World Englishes by Kachru, according to which Pakistani English is included in outer circle. This demonstrates that Pakistan though received through colonial past has been nativized and adapted to the local languages and cultural realities (Kachru, 1992). This mixing of English language with the local terms enables people to show their respect, uphold social ranks and support cultural values despite both formal and informal interactions (Bilal et al., 2025).

Pakistani English also shows politeness and respect as it is the indication of Pakistani culture and society. They respect elders, show solidarity and social closeness and reduce interpersonal dynamics. Politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) proposes that positive implications and politeness are used to establish solidarity and minimise social distance as well as preserve harmony in the course of interactions. Threatening face behaviour is encouraged to be reduced and minimised and positive face work is supported (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Thus, these kinship terms are commonly used as a buffer of communication, letting speakers easily negotiate hierarchical relations and do it in a cultural framework (Anwar, 2023).

Meanwhile, these terms are a strong indication of acquaintance and kinship. The utilisation of terms bhai and baji creates a feelings of in- groupness and proximity. Male students frequently call each other Bhai and females are termed as baji, api, it shows a sign of trust and friendship and it is socially acceptable way of addressing each other. These terms also shows Power relations in Pakistan because they make differences according to age, gender, profession, status and social hierarchies. There is a respect in Pakistani relations even when someone is younger in age but is respected because of relations. They are respected because of ties and dynamics in these knots. These linguistics way of doing things recognize authority yet at the same time, they are warm and culturally close. This illustrates the role of language as a social marker and as a connectors.

Code-Switching between different languages in Pakistani English including Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, Saraiki etc is a feature of Pakistani English (Asghar et al., 2021). Kinship terms are often left untranslated in English conversations because they carry cultural meanings and

values. For instance; “my chachu is coming today”, shows solidarity and social closeness. Although, the sentence is in English but this “chachu” term shows familiarity and local cultural identity (Qureshi, 2023).

As Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski treated kin terms as a social road maps that prescribe roles, duties, responsibilities and rights, help in keeping the community stable (Radcliffe-Brown, 1950). Schneider viewed kinship as a set of cultural symbols (like “blood” vs “law”) that people used to construct meanings and identity (Schneider, 1968). Morgan thought kinship terms were a kind of “progress bar” for societies. For instance; in a same hunter gather groups, everyone in the same age set is called “brother” or “sister” to each other which spreads trust beyond nuclear family. That broader kinship label shows a collective identity that values group survival over individual lineage (Morgan, 1871).

Although, the terms of kinship are important but some gaps are left in this research. This literature has paid a lot of attention to the general trends in sociolinguistics but broader fields of studies like diversification according to provinces and ethnicity has not been explored yet. On the same note, the emerging areas or fields like digital communication and terms in social media usage are not discussed much. The dimension of generational differences because the younger speakers use these terms more frequently than older speakers. It emphasizes that Pakistani English is not merely a form of Standard English but a legitimate localized variety with its own pragmatic norms. It highlights that linguistic options indicate familiarity and cultural norms like respect, politeness and collectivism. Above all, it shows how language is a reflection of culture, it has a burden of tradition, social relationships and identity.

Research Methodology

The research design used in this study is qualitative which explores the role of kinship terms as identity markers in Pakistani English. It investigates the cultural aspects and linguistic forms of the words. The data is gathered from naturally occurring conversations, social media, television dialogues and the interviews of Pakistani English speakers of different ethnic groups and social backgrounds. Sample is taken from population of both male and females of age about 18 to 50 from urban and rural areas. These areas show diversity in their patterns in speech and social contexts. This wide range of data shows how the terms like chacha, mamu , ammi and all others are used to negotiate authority and strengthen social and cultural identities. Semi structured interviews are conducted to collect the data and participants expresses their ideas about how much they know or understand the meanings of that particular terms and how it hold a cultural values for them . Purposive sampling is used to collect the data. Focus is on people who has high rate of communication in educational, professional and online environment. Then interviews are recorded and transcribed and then further analyzed participants tone, body language and linguistics peculiarities.

The thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) is applied to analyzing qualitative data and identifying common patterns, wording and contextual interpretation. It is analyzed in terms of localization of these terms in native language like Urdu, Punjabi etc. The code switching, pragmatic adaptation and how the terms indicate respect, intimacy or solidarity based on the situations. In the quantitative aspect, frequency analysis is used to analyze how much or how frequent such terms are used to address others and construct social relationship. This assist in determining the most common markers of kinship and the situations where it is likely to be common.

Ethical issues are considered in the study. Some data is collected by natural observation but during interviews participants know the research objectives and why this research is being conducted. The anonymity and confidentiality are ensured by assigning pseudonyms to all participants and omitting any identifying details.

Data Analysis

The interpretation of the information obtained after the interviews, observations, interactions on social media and recordings of conversations reveals that kinship forms are not borrowing but a significant linguistic devices to express cultural values and social identity. In the data, speakers often refers to non-relatives as bhai or baji which reflects that these words are employed to establish a sense of familiarity, friendliness and closeness and not the actual kinship. The statistics indicate that these terms minimise the interpersonal distance particularly the conversations between strangers, they even forms a sense of familiarity between strangers. According to the participants, it is frequently culturally inappropriate to call someone by their names in English, thus to preserve the norms or values of politeness being based on South Asian culture. In the workplace, schools, markets these terms are used everywhere to show Pakistani culture and their politeness norms. It means Pakistanis are strongly influenced by their communicative values that are based on their respect, harmony of relations and societal balance.

Use of kinship terms is an identity positioning in multilingual settings. Even highly competent English speakers use kinship terms in their language which shows their cultural belongings. Participants express their ideas as the use of kinship terms in Pakistani English is more natural, more Pakistani sounding or more respectful and demonstrates that linguistic choices serve symbolic functions. Kinship terms are more frequently addressed in rural speakers in all situations, whereas urban used it more strategically to make interactions less confrontational.

Findings

The results of the research indicate that the terms of kinship are key to identity formation in Pakistani English and have a wide range of sociolinguistic functions. Firstly, these words serve as effective signs of unity and social intimacy and allow speakers to build rapport and ingroup identity with strangers. This is because they often appear in both casual and semi-formal communication, hence they are ingrained in daily social communication. In addition, Pakistani English kinship terms also serve as politeness resources and greatly help in the management of respect, hierarchy and social distance. Incorporation of the honorific reflects how the English language is adjusted to the cultural standards of the local people, resulting in the hybridism that preserves the Pakistani politeness traditions.

Further, the results highlight that kinship terms are good indicators of cultural identity. Their application is intentional identity performance in which speakers remain culturally authentic even when speaking a global language. This mingling of languages demonstrates the fact that Pakistani English is not merely the English used in Pakistan but an indigenized form under the influence of the Urdu language and local languages. Moreover, the data indicate the gendered and age-related patterns of using the kinship terms, which help to create and strengthen the social roles. The use of such terms as aunty and baji is more commonly applied to women, and bhai and chacha are more often used with men, which are culturally appropriate in relation to gender and age. Lastly, there is a difference between urban and rural settings, which suggests the terms of kinship can be used to negotiate geographical identity, too, with rural speakers using terms more naturally and consistently, whereas urban speakers use them strategically to work around social distance.

In general, the research findings suggest that the use of kinship terms in Pakistani English is not a mere accidental and ornamental language object, but a significant identity marker, which indicates cultural values, interpersonal relationships and localized communicative patterns. They are used to prove that the Pakistani English is highly nativized and culturally entrenched and serves as a place where language, identity, and culture converge.

Conclusion

It is shown that the use of kinship terms in Pakistani English is much more than simply lexical borrowings; it is also a potent sociolinguistic instrument to build, negotiate, and assert identity in culturally significant manners. Their prevalence in the social environment, both in small-scale communication and in the workplace, demonstrates that English in Pakistan has been highly influenced by the local cultural practices, particularly those associated with respect, hierarchy, solidarity and relational proximity. Terms like *bhai*, *baji*, *aunty*, *chacha* and *beta* can be used to reduce the distance between people, create instant familiarity and show the collectivism aspect of Pakistani society whereby interpersonal relationships and belonging to a community are at the heart of communication.

Moreover, kinship terms in Pakistani English serve as significant identity indicators that can be used to show the intersection of language, culture, and social relations. They show that communication in Pakistan is not merely the transfer of information but also about preserving respect, creating warmth and entering a common cultural context. With the help of the role of the terms of kinship, we get a better idea of the sociolinguistic nature of the Pakistani English and how the speakers of the language can give expression of belonging, politeness and cultural authenticity through the use of language.

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