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Pragmatic Language Choices in the Digital Age: A Comparative Study of Tanzanian and Pakistani Undergraduates

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Abstract:

Digital communication has reshaped how multilingual speakers make pragmatic language choices in everyday interaction. Digital platforms reorganize language through speed, multimodality, and technical affordances in emerging multilingual societies. As undergraduate students are intensive users of digital media, their interactional practices offer a key site for examining pragmatic choices across face-to-face and online contexts. This study examines how Tanzanian and Pakistani undergraduate students negotiate language mixing and language purity, with particular attention to digitally mediated interaction. Through observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions, qualitative, inductive, and comparative data were collected and analyzed thematically. The findings indicate that Pakistani students rely heavily on Romanised Urdu for digital convenience, while experiencing increasing difficulty with Urdu script and vocabulary, suggesting script attrition and lexical erosion. Emojis and memes provide multimodal pragmatic communication of humour, attitude, tone, and emotion. Habitual code-mixing reflects lexical automatisation, alongside participant concern regarding younger generations' diminishing lexical depth in local languages. The study concludes that pragmatic choice extends beyond speech to include scripts, visual modes, and digital infrastructures, with implications for language maintenance in digital futures.

* **Nasir Razzaq**

Introduction

Digital communication technologies change how people talk, make meaning and think about who they are, in emerging societies. Platforms such as WhatsApp, social media, and AI-supported communication tools have introduced new linguistic affordances, influencing how multilingual speakers make pragmatic decisions in everyday discourse. In emerging societies, where multilingualism is a normative communicative reality rather than an exception, digitally mediated communication is not simply a new channel for older linguistic practices; instead, it increasingly reorganises linguistic choices, social meanings, and identity performances. The changes which drive social transformation are most visible through student activities because undergraduate students spend most of their time using mobile devices and social media platforms. The way that they communicate with others through direct contact and through messaging apps shows how multilingual speakers handle meaning creation and relationship building and personal presentation in environments that use advanced technology (Barton & Lee, 2013; Herring, 2004).

Within multilingual settings, language mixing, commonly examined through the lenses of code-switching and code-mixing, has long been recognised as a structured and socially meaningful communicative practice. Classical work in interactional sociolinguistics positions code-switching as a contextualisation strategy through which speakers signal conversational frames, negotiate roles, and manage interpersonal alignment (Gumperz, 1982). Similarly, markedness-based approaches conceptualise language choice as a pragmatic resource for negotiating social expectations, indexing norms, and constructing stance (Myers-Scotton, 1993). Structural and typological accounts further distinguish between different forms of multilingual alternation, clarifying how languages interact within syntactic and discourse boundaries (Muysken, 2000; Poplack, 1980). Across these traditions, a shared insight persists: multilingual alternation is not random or deficient but highly functional, serving communicative goals such as emphasis, clarification, identity positioning, humour, and solidarity (Blommaert, 2010; Heller, 2007).

In contrast, multilingual language practices are not ideologically neutral. They often exist alongside ideas about language purity. These ideas suggest that speakers should follow monolingual rules, especially in formal or official settings. They also imply that mixing languages harms linguistic ability and cultural identity. The analysis of language purity shows that it extends beyond its primary function as a linguistic prescription because it demonstrates the historical power structures which shape institutional standards and create fears about cultural heritage protection (Holmes, 2017; Phillipson, 2019). The ideologies of purity in postcolonial societies intersect with nation-building efforts and educational systems and social class divisions to define how speakers assess language use

based on its legitimacy and correctness and social acceptance. The binary opposition between mixing and purity can be analytically limiting, because speakers treat both as semiotic resources which they choose based on their social environment and their relationship to the audience and their goal for communication.

Such processes are especially evident in Tanzania and Pakistan, two multilingual postcolonial societies with unique historical trajectories, language policy regimes, and sociolinguistic landscapes. In Tanzania, its national language ideology centered on Kiswahili has strong associations with notions of unification, accessibility, and social inclusion, although English also plays a crucial role in higher education and communication (Brock-Utne, 2007; Mohr & Ochieng, 2017). In Pakistan, a country known for its linguistic diversity, there is a linguistic hierarchy with Urdu functioning as a national lingua franca, while English is a potent symbol of elite education, institutional authority, and socioeconomic success; other languages like Punjabi also play a crucial role in identity construction and communication (Rahman, 2002; Salman & Bukhari, 2022). Multilingual speakers in these communities use their multiple languages to navigate the language market which exists because some languages show greater value and social power than others, while certain languages carry special status and contemporary appeal and institutional power and genuine cultural identity. As a result, everyday language choices constitute a continuous pragmatic negotiation of meaning, identity, and social standing.

The swift expansion of digitally mediated communication amplifies these interactions by introducing novel communicative possibilities and limitations. Digital spaces are not inherently neutral; rather, platforms influence discourse through characteristics like swift exchanges, audience collapse, multimodality, and shifting informal conventions. Digital writing often dissolves the distinctions between speech and text, generating hybrid registers that merge conversational immediacy with refined written forms (Androutsopoulos, 2015; Barton & Lee, 2013). Multilingual individuals utilize these affordances to enact identity, convey humor, navigate face concerns, and manage social dynamics, frequently with greater adaptability than in face-to-face contexts, where immediate social monitoring can restrict innovation (Androutsopoulos, 2014).

While this study does not examine AI as an interactional agent, digitally mediated communication is increasingly shaped by AI-enabled infrastructures which include predictive text systems, autocorrect tools, transliteration keyboards and algorithmically curated language recommendations. Users who do not actively use AI still operate machine-based language systems which favor specific writing systems and spelling methods and word selections and established linguistic standards. The technology system makes certain language selection processes more accessible while it maintains existing language hierarchies in

multilingual settings where local languages have inconsistent technological backing. The English language gains algorithmic advantage because training data and digital systems treat it as more important than other languages. AI platforms create hidden effects which define linguistic choices through their assessment of what users find simple to understand and commonly accepted as proper communication methods and socially acceptable forms of digital interaction (Barton & Lee, 2013; Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2014). Multilingual youth demonstrate both resistance and subversion of technological limitations while creating linguistic mixes which represent their social identity and global citizenship and regional cultural heritage.

Examining pragmatic language choices in multilingual contexts carries both descriptive value and its potential to develop theories through cross-language comparisons and active research methods and ethical standards. By examining how speakers use multilingual resources to achieve their goals, we can improve pragmatic theory. This approach highlights language choice as a way of thinking in action, rather than just a structural feature (Gumperz, 1982; Grice, 1975; Leech, 1983). Understanding language purity as both a pragmatic and ideological standpoint enhances the comprehension of attitude, indexical meaning, and sociolinguistic positioning in multilingual interactions (Silverstein, 2003; Heller, 2007). A comparative analysis of Tanzania and Pakistan enhances cross-contextual theorization by differentiating common pragmatic reasons from regionally influenced language ideologies and stratification patterns, thus reinforcing more robust models of multilingual meaning-making. This study's methodology contributes to inductive qualitative research by combining naturally occurring conversation with participant reflections. This approach captures subtle thinking that is typically overlooked by survey-based or solely structured methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2013).

Despite extensive scholarship on code-switching, language ideology, and digital discourse, two critical gaps remain in pragmatic research. First, much existing work remains confined to single-community or single-country contexts, limiting the ability to distinguish locally specific patterns from broader cross-cultural tendencies. Comparative analyses are needed to determine whether similar pragmatic motivations yield different linguistic outcomes under distinct policy regimes, educational structures, and ideological environments. Second, the increasing hybridity of digital communication challenges the stability of classic pragmatic and sociolinguistic models developed primarily in face-to-face settings. For example, markedness frameworks presuppose relatively stable norms, whereas digital interaction often involves rapidly shifting expectations within the same communicative exchange (Myers-Scotton, 1993). Similarly, interactional accounts must now account for the absence of embodied cues, the presence of multimodal meaning-making, and platform-specific practices such as emojis,

reaction features, asynchronous repair, and algorithmically mediated visibility (Herring, 2004). These tensions become particularly visible when examining why speakers choose to mix languages, or deliberately avoid mixing, across both digital and offline contexts.

This study fills the existing gap in the literature on language mixing and language purity by taking a comparative approach to the everyday communicative practices of Tanzanian and Pakistani undergraduate students, considering language mixing and language purity as pragmatic choices that are influenced by the students' sociocultural context, ideological positions, and digitally mediated infrastructures. This study aligns with an inductive analytical orientation in which patterns of pragmatic reasoning emerge from observed interaction and participant reflection rather than being constrained by any set of predetermined categories. By foregrounding pragmatic agency, the analysis treats multilingual language choice as a socially embedded form of meaning-making through which speakers pursue communicative goals, manage interpersonal relations, and position themselves within intersecting local and global linguistic hierarchies.

In line with the above concerns, the primary aim of this paper is to examine how undergraduate students in Tanzania and Pakistan pragmatically negotiate language mixing and language purity in everyday communication, with particular attention to how digitally mediated interaction reshapes these choices. This paper is designed to share early insights from the dissertation project while establishing a clear analytical frame for interpreting subsequent empirical findings across both face-to-face and digital contexts.

Methodology

This research utilizes an inductive qualitative approach to investigate pragmatic language choices among undergraduate students in Tanzania and Pakistan in both face-to-face and digitally mediated interactions. The analysis is based on a constructivist paradigm, viewing meaning as socially constructed and interpreted through participants' lived experiences and interactional contexts, allowing themes to emerge from naturally occurring data instead of imposing rigid pre-defined categories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The University of Dodoma in Tanzania and Air University in Pakistan were chosen as research locations. These institutions represent two different, yet similar, multilingual postcolonial environments. In these settings, national languages and English interact with local languages. This allows for a thorough comparison of pragmatic choices (Yin, 2003; Creswell, 2013). Participants are selected using purposive sampling. This is supported by a short pre-survey to find students who regularly use the relevant language pairs in their daily lives and are willing to take part in observations, interviews, and focus group discussions. Recruitment continues until thematic saturation is reached, following

established principles of qualitative sampling (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Saunders et al., 2018; Creswell, 2013; Maxwell & Reybold, 2015).

Data are produced using a triangulated approach focused on observation, augmented by semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). To minimize observer effects while maintaining authenticity, observation combined overt participation with minimally intrusive naturalistic observation, conducted under institutional ethical approval and informed consent procedures. Interactions are documented within environments like classrooms, common areas, and specific digital platforms (e.g., WhatsApp groups), all under the umbrella of general informed consent and anonymization protocols.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) are held independently within each nation to uncover common norms and ideologies developed through peer negotiation (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Simultaneously, interviews explore participants' reasons for code-switching, their avoidance of mixing languages, and their adaptation of language choices in various situations. Data collection methods encompass field notes and, in the case of digital interactions, ethically obtained screenshots.

All data sources, including observation field notes, interview responses, focus group discussions, and ethically obtained screenshots of digital interactions, were analysed through an inductive thematic analysis informed by Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. The analysis was conducted manually rather than through qualitative data analysis software. First, the researcher repeatedly read and reviewed the dataset in order to achieve familiarity with recurring interactional patterns, pragmatic choices, and participants' explanations of their language behaviour. Second, initial codes were generated across both face-to-face and digitally mediated data, with attention to recurring linguistic practices, communicative intentions, identity positioning, politeness strategies, and attitudes toward language mixing and purity. Third, related codes were grouped into broader candidate themes, which were then reviewed and refined through constant comparison across the Tanzanian and Pakistani datasets. In the case of digital interaction data, screenshots were treated as contextualised textual and interactional records and were coded in relation to orthographic choices, emoji use, translanguaging practices, and other platform-shaped communicative features. Themes were subsequently defined, named, and interpreted in relation to the study's comparative and pragmatic orientation.

Throughout the process, reflexivity was maintained to account for the researcher's interpretive role, while rigor is reinforced through triangulation (Denzin, 2012; Creswell, 2013) and the concepts of trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability) as articulated by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Before collecting data, ethical approval is acquired, and all participants give informed consent. To protect privacy, both face-to-face and digital data are

anonymized, and steps are taken to avoid including personal information or private details.

Limitations of the Study

This paper presents early insights from an ongoing doctoral dissertation and, therefore, its findings should be interpreted with appropriate caution. The study is based on an inductive qualitative design and a context-specific sample drawn from two universities, one in Tanzania and one in Pakistan. Accordingly, the findings are not intended for statistical generalisation to all undergraduate populations in either country. Rather, they offer analytically grounded preliminary insights into how pragmatic language choices are negotiated in specific multilingual and digitally mediated settings. As the broader dissertation progresses, expanded data collection and deeper cross-contextual analysis may further refine, confirm, or complicate the patterns discussed in this paper.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents and discusses early findings from an inductive thematic analysis of face-to-face and digitally mediated interactions among undergraduate students in Tanzania and Pakistan. Rather than treating findings and discussion as separate stages, the analysis integrates empirical patterns with interpretive commentary to highlight how pragmatic reasoning informs language mixing and language purity choices in everyday communication. The themes presented below represent recurrent patterns observed across the dataset and are discussed in relation to participants' interactional goals, ideological positions, and the affordances of digital communication environments.

a. Orthographic Code-Switching

A prominent trend in digitally mediated group communication is the increasing use of Romanised Urdu alongside English and hybrid multilingual forms, despite Urdu traditionally being written in a right-to-left Perso-Arabic script. In contrast, Kiswahili already employs a left-to-right Roman script and therefore does not undergo script transformation in digital contexts. As a result, this phenomenon is analytically specific to the Pakistani dataset, where Urdu undergoes a shift in writing system when rendered in Roman characters. This practice can be conceptualised as cross-script code-switching, orthographic code-switching, or more precisely, Romanised-script switching at the graphemic level. The shift does not occur solely between languages (e.g., Urdu–English), but also across writing systems, demonstrating that pragmatic choice operates simultaneously at lexical, syntactic, orthographic, and technological levels.

Figure 1: *WhatsApp group interaction illustrating Romanised Urdu and multilingual exchanges*

Interview data indicate that participants predominantly adopt Romanised Urdu due to its perceived efficiency, ease of use, and compatibility with existing digital infrastructures. Participants consistently reported that typing in Urdu script on mobile keyboards resulted in slower typing speed, increased cognitive effort, and poor ergonomic experience, particularly in fast-paced group chats that require rapid humour, immediate responses, and playful turn-taking. Several Urdu-speaking participants also acknowledged limited ability to read and write in Urdu script, despite oral fluency, attributing this gap to educational practices and digital communication environments that separate spoken competence from script literacy. Romanised Urdu enables faster interaction, reduces interruptions caused by autocorrect, and aligns with contemporary digital youth culture, where English–Roman combinations function as markers of modernity, playfulness, and peer-group belonging. Table 1 summarises participants' self-reported script practices and abilities, contextualising these qualitative observations.

Aspect	**Description**	**Frequency**	%
Regular use of Romanised Urdu	Participants who primarily write in Romanised Urdu	35	100 %
Difficulty writing in Urdu script	Participants reporting difficulty	30	85%
Occasional use of Urdu script	Participants who sometimes write in Urdu script	8	22%
Limited knowledge of original Urdu words	Participants reporting lexical gaps	14	40%

Table 1: *Participants' Reported Use of Romanised Urdu and Ability in Urdu Script (n = 35)*

Beyond efficiency, Romanisation functions as a social and expressive resource in digital interaction. Participants reported that Romanised Urdu allows them to sustain humorous, teasing, and emotionally expressive exchanges through casual speech patterns, stylised spellings, elongated vowels, emojis, and playful orthographic creativity, such as expressions like "Chamchiii konn 😂😂" ('Who is the teacher's favourite?'). Romanisation thus becomes a tool for performing intimacy, humour, and shared identity, enabling informal bonding through linguistic forms that resonate with participants' immediate social circles.

At the same time, this practice reveals how digital technologies and platform infrastructures actively shape linguistic behaviour. Predictive text systems, default keyboard settings, transliteration tools, and language-selection algorithms collectively privilege Roman and English-based inputs, significantly lowering the cost of producing Romanised text while increasing the difficulty of sustained engagement with Urdu script. These technological affordances implicitly encourage Romanisation and, over time, normalise it as the default mode of digital writing. Participants displayed varied responses to these pressures: while most accommodated the system for pragmatic reasons, a minority consciously resisted by using Urdu script in specific contexts they perceived as symbolically important for cultural continuity, identity assertion, or ethical commitment to the language.

The findings indicate that extended reliance on Romanised Urdu is not a neutral adaptation. Participants' reported difficulty in recalling original Urdu vocabulary and producing Urdu script suggests that Romanisation contributes to script attrition and gradual lexical weakening, particularly among younger users whose primary literacy practices are digitally mediated. This orthographic shift therefore operates as a double-edged pragmatic strategy: while it enhances communicative speed and social alignment, it simultaneously reduces sustained exposure to Urdu script and weakens access to indigenous lexical resources.

Romanised Urdu use in WhatsApp interactions thus exemplifies how digital affordances reshape pragmatic choice at scriptal, linguistic, and social levels simultaneously. Script switching functions as a resource for efficiency, humour, identity performance, peer alignment, and technological adaptation, but it also introduces long-term consequences for script competence and lexical retention. These findings demonstrate that pragmatic reasoning in emerging digital societies extends beyond spoken language into the politics, hierarchies, and preservation risks embedded within writing systems themselves.

b. Visual Code-Switching

A prominent pattern in digitally mediated interaction among Tanzanian and Pakistani undergraduates is the use of memes and image-based replies as substitutes for textual responses. Rather than functioning as decorative or supplementary content, memes frequently operate as standalone conversational turns, replacing written language entirely. Participants often responded to prior messages using reaction memes, GIFs, or visual jokes, thereby transforming images into primary communicative resources within group discourse.

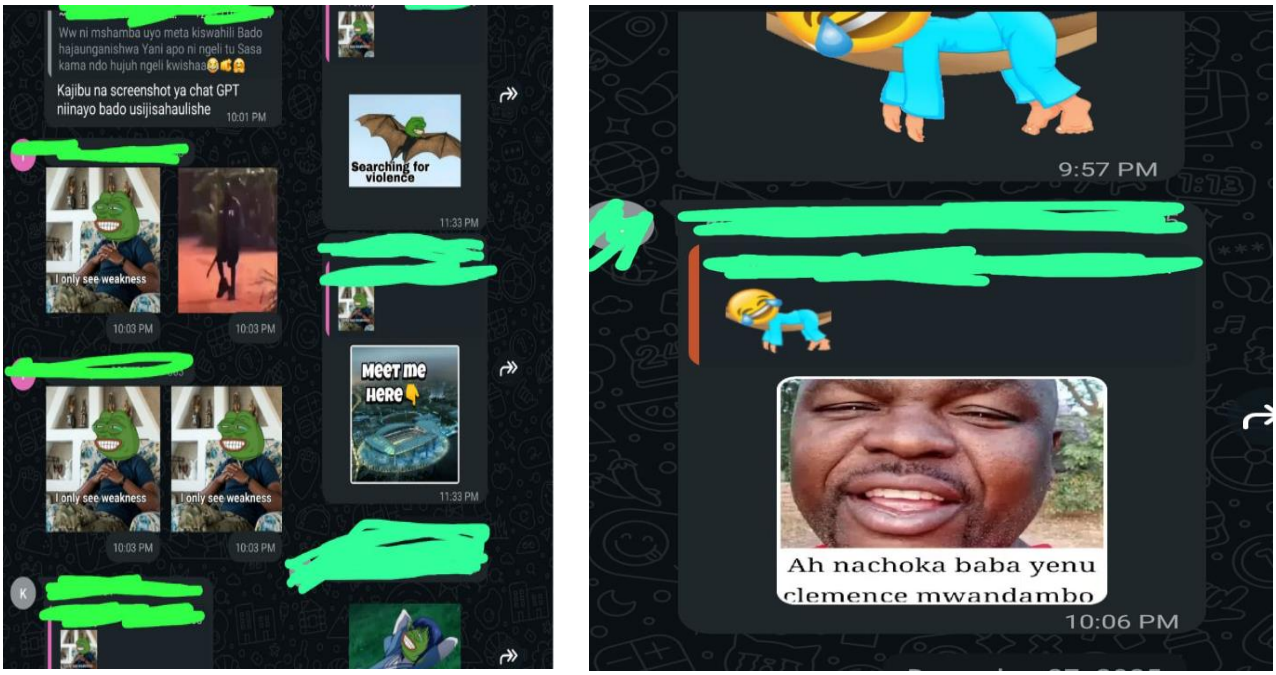

Figure 3: *WhatsApp group interaction illustrating visual code-switching in Tanzanian context*

From a pragmatic standpoint, memes in these exchanges function as multimodal speech acts capable of conveying stance, evaluation, agreement, mockery, sarcasm, and humour without relying on verbal text. In the Tanzanian dataset, students used reaction memes to respond to teasing, shared jokes, and playful interactions, signalling amusement, solidarity, and collective participation in humour. In the Pakistani dataset, memes were commonly deployed in response to peer teasing, playful naming practices, and framed jokes, allowing participants to express irony, exaggeration, and evaluation through visual performance rather than explicit verbal critique.

Figure 4: *WhatsApp group interaction illustrating visual code-switching in Pakistani Context*

This practice can be analytically conceptualised as visual code-switching, whereby participants shift from linguistic text to culturally recognisable visual discourse to achieve pragmatic goals. Memes condense complex meanings through shared intertextual references, enabling users to communicate layered messages, such as ridicule, playful criticism, or social commentary, without extended explanation. Effective meme use depends on shared digital literacy and cultural knowledge, indicating that visual humour functions as a marker of group membership and communicative competence.

Importantly, memes serve as interactional tools for managing social relationships and face concerns. Participants frequently used meme responses to soften disagreement, mitigate criticism, and maintain a playful tone during potentially sensitive exchanges. By embedding critique within humour and exaggeration, memes allow speakers to perform jocular facework, expressing stance while avoiding direct confrontation. In this sense, memes operate as pragmatic buffers, preserving group harmony while still enabling social positioning and commentary.

Beyond immediate interactional effects, meme use also contributes to identity construction and social belonging in digital youth culture. Posting memes indexes familiarity with global internet humour, creativity, and peer-group norms, signalling participation in contemporary digital communities. For instance, in the Tanzanian dataset (see Figure 3), participants often integrated memes with Kiswahili-based teasing and locally grounded humour, producing a hybrid identity that blends national cultural expression with global meme culture.

Pakistani participants similarly combined memes with Romanised Urdu and English, as illustrated in Figure 4, constructing a layered digital identity that merges local linguistic practices with transnational online discourse.

Meme-based interaction demonstrates that pragmatic meaning in emerging digital societies is increasingly visual, intertextual, and performative. Memes function not merely as entertainment, but as culturally embedded pragmatic acts through which students negotiate humour, stance, power, and belonging. This positions memes as a central site where language, culture, technology, and pragmatic reasoning intersect in contemporary multilingual student communication.

c. Semiotic Switching in Multilingual Digital Interaction

A distinct but related phenomenon observed in Tanzanian and Pakistani digital interactions is the use of emojis as semiotic resources that modify or replace textual meaning. Unlike memes, which often function as full visual discourse units, emojis primarily operate at the micro-interactional level, shaping tone, emotion, politeness, and interpretive framing within ongoing exchanges. Participants frequently used emojis alongside text or as standalone responses, indicating that emojis can serve as complete pragmatic utterances in certain conversational contexts.

Figure 5: *WhatsApp group interaction illustrating semiotic-switching of Tanzanian Students*

Figure 6: *WhatsApp group interaction illustrating semiotic-switching of Pakistani Students*

This pattern can be conceptualised as semiotic switching, where speakers shift from verbal linguistic signs to non-verbal symbolic signs in order to accomplish interactional goals. Unlike traditional code-switching, which involves alternation between languages, semiotic switching reflects movement between modes of meaning-making, such as text, emoji, and other visual cues. Emojis function as digital paralinguistic markers, compensating for the absence of prosody, facial expression, gesture, and vocal tone in text-based communication.

At the pragmatic level, emojis perform a range of illocutionary functions, including signalling laughter, softening criticism, mitigating face-threatening acts, expressing irony, and framing utterances as playful or non-serious. The dataset shows that participants frequently used laughing emojis to mark shared amusement, reinforcing group cohesion and signalling that interactions should be interpreted as friendly rather than confrontational. Emojis thus operate as tone regulators, guiding recipients toward the intended pragmatic interpretation of a message.

Emoji use also plays a key role in politeness management and emotional regulation. Participants often appended emojis to teasing or ambiguous messages in order to reduce perceived harshness, clarify intent, and prevent misinterpretation. In this way, emojis function as pragmatic hedges, signalling warmth, humour, or non-hostility. This practice aligns with broader theories of jocular facework, where humour and symbolic cues serve to preserve interpersonal harmony in socially delicate situations.

Beyond interpersonal management, emojis contribute to identity performance and digital social positioning. Competent emoji use indexes familiarity with youth digital culture, emotional expressiveness, and online communicative fluency. In Tanzanian interactions, emojis co-occur with Kiswahili humour and playful AI engagement, reinforcing locally grounded yet

globally connected identities. In Pakistani exchanges, emojis appear alongside Romanised Urdu and English, contributing to a hybrid semiotic identity that blends local linguistic norms with transnational digital practices.

Emoji-based communication demonstrates that pragmatic competence in contemporary digital environments requires mastery of multiple semiotic systems, not only multiple languages. Emojis operate as micro-level meaning modulators, shaping emotion, tone, and politeness in rapid online interaction. This expands traditional pragmatic models by showing that communicative choice in multilingual digital spaces involves switching across symbolic modes, not merely across spoken or written languages.

d. Code-Switching, Code-Mixing, and Translanguaging Patterns

The complete dataset which includes both digital and face-to-face interactions demonstrates that students regularly employ code-switching and code-mixing as practical tools for their daily interactions. Multilingual speakers in Tanzania and Pakistan demonstrated their ability to speak English while switching between local and national languages which included Kiswahili in Tanzania and Urdu with regional codes and English in Pakistan. The participants recognized this alternation as a contextual communication method which depended on the specific audience and setting together with the social customs associated with different codes. In natural conversations speakers used code-switching to show their opinions and to make jokes while they changed topics and explained their thoughts; thus multilingual switching served as an interactional toolkit which helped participants understand each other and build their connections with others during live interactions.

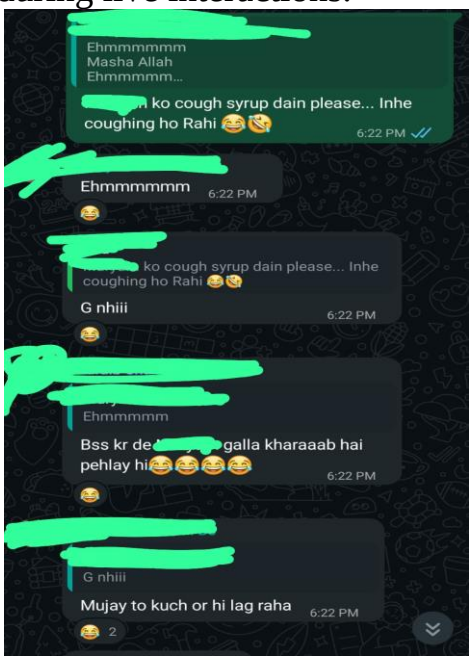

Figure 7: *An example of code-switching*

Participants' reflections in interviews and FGDs suggest that a significant portion of switching occurs non-consciously, particularly at the lexical level. Many speakers reported that words from English or mixed varieties "come automatically," shaped by habitual exposure, daily repetition, and the normalisation of hybrid speech in academic, digital, and peer environments. This automaticity appears linked to globalised media consumption, prolonged engagement with social platforms, and constant interaction in spaces where English-Romanised discourse dominates. Over time, switching becomes an unmarked and effortless practice, embedded in routine cognitive and communicative patterns rather than experienced as a deliberate stylistic decision. In this respect, code-mixing reflects a form of linguistic automatisation, where language choice is shaped by familiarity, speed, and repeated use.

"Unajua, sometimes maneno ya Englishi yanakuja tu automatically. Tunazungumza hivi kila siku, mpaka unasahau neno la Kiswahili."

('You know, sometimes English words just come automatically. We speak like this every day, to the point that you forget the Kiswahili word.')

This also resonates with translanguaging perspectives, which conceptualise multilingual practices not as movement between discrete language systems, but as the deployment of an integrated linguistic repertoire. From this viewpoint, the non-conscious, automatic, and unmarked mixing reported by participants reflects habitual meaning-making rather than deliberate language choice. Students do not experience their linguistic resources as separate entities (e.g., "English" versus "Kiswahili" or "Urdu"), but as fluid and co-existing elements shaped by repeated use in academic, digital, and peer environments.

Alongside these habitual patterns, students also described conscious and playful switching, teasing, joking, showing wit, or sounding stylish among peers. In such cases, switching becomes a performative and pragmatic resource used to enhance humour, dramatise stance, soften criticism, impress friends, or sound socially "cool." English insertions or mixed phrasing were often used to deliver punchlines, reduce the seriousness of potentially sensitive remarks, or maintain a light-hearted tone. This reveals code-mixing as a form of stance-marking and social performance, where speakers strategically manipulate linguistic choices to manage face, tone, and group belonging.

Switching was also strongly tied to contextual anchoring, particularly institutional and academic spaces. Participants repeatedly noted that being in college or university settings triggers English or English-mixed speech, not only because English is associated with academic discourse, but because it signals alignment with the norms of an educated environment — "we are in a university space; we speak accordingly." Here, code choice functions as a marker of

situational awareness and institutional identity, allowing speakers to index seriousness, professionalism, or intellectual participation.

A further recurring motive for switching was efficiency and expressive precision. In fast-paced group conversations, where turn-taking is rapid and overlapping, English or mixed varieties were perceived as quicker to retrieve, easier to articulate, and more suitable for concepts related to education, technology, social media, and contemporary youth culture. This tendency was particularly visible in WhatsApp interactions, where Romanised scripts, emojis, and memes create a hybrid communicative space in which lexical items from multiple languages circulate fluidly. In such environments, mixing often becomes the most economical communicative route, shaped not only by linguistic preference but also by digital infrastructures that privilege English terminology, speed, and brevity.

Beyond pragmatic convenience, the dataset reveals an emerging and analytically significant phenomenon: lexical displacement and gradual erosion of local-language vocabulary. During fieldwork, the researcher documented frequently recurring mixed words and later asked participants , especially in FGDs, to provide Kiswahili or Urdu equivalents. A striking pattern emerged: only a small proportion could respond immediately, while many hesitated, required extended thinking time, or could not retrieve an original local-language word at all. Participants themselves attributed this difficulty to repeated reliance on English or mixed forms, explaining that certain indigenous terms now feel unfamiliar, unavailable, or unnecessary due to everyday usage patterns.

This moment reframes code-mixing from being purely a pragmatic choice to being a factor shaping lexical memory and linguistic access. Frequent reliance on borrowed or dominant-code terms appears to reduce the accessibility of indigenous equivalents — a process that can be described as graduated lexical erosion. Importantly, this erosion is domain-specific: vocabulary linked to technology, campus life, youth culture, and digital communication shows the strongest displacement, while local languages remain more stable in family, religion, tradition, and culturally anchored practices.

Perceptions about younger generations further reinforce this interpretation. Many participants expressed concern that younger students mix languages more frequently and possess thinner lexical depth in Urdu or Kiswahili. One participant observed:

“Mujhe lagta hai ke hum se baron ko Urdu achi tarah aati hai, lekin hamain bohat kam aati hai. Maine apne aas-paas younger logon ko dekha hai jo English bolna zyada prefer karte hain, is liye unhein Urdu ke bohat se alfaaz yaad hi nahi rehte. Mujhe lagta hai younger log bohat se Urdu words jaante hi nahi honge.”

(‘I feel that older people know Urdu well, but we know much less. I have seen younger people around me who prefer speaking English, which is why they do not remember many Urdu words. I think younger people probably do not know many Urdu words at all.’)

While such claims may partly reflect generational bias, they still constitute important metapragmatic evidence. They reveal that students perceive mixing not only as a personal habit but as a broader generational linguistic shift, shaped by schooling, media exposure, and digital environments. Rather than signalling an overall decline in communicative ability, these perceptions suggest a reconfiguration of multilingual competence, where vocabulary increasingly migrates across languages and certain lexical fields become dominated by borrowed forms.

In social interactions, code-switching and code-mixing serve as indicators, referring to social ideals and how people see themselves, beyond only what is literally said. English insertions may signify education, modernity, prestige, or institutional authority, whereas local or national languages may denote closeness, solidarity, authenticity, or cultural rootedness. Speakers switch not merely due to capability, but because each code embodies social significance that can be utilized to jest with friends, mitigate face-threat, align with peers, manage pressure, or alter conversational tone.

The comparative perspective enhances this analysis. In Tanzania, Kiswahili's significant national legitimacy frequently establishes it as the default public language, whilst English is designated for institutional or academic representation. In Pakistan, English and Urdu converge with social status, education, and elite identity, whereas regional languages provide more dimensions of affiliation. These ideological differences influence the direction, frequency, and social meaning of code-switching. However, the underlying practical reasons for code-switching are similar: using multiple languages helps manage relationships, express identity, follow situational rules, and navigate power dynamics. This is especially true in digital and institutional settings, which increasingly support the use of mixed language skills.

This study has important ethical and educational consequences. When students perceive a correlation between extensive mixing and the loss of local-language vocabulary, it prompts inquiries regarding the types of linguistic resources that are either being reinforced or being undermined by educational systems, digital frameworks, and daily communication practices. The concern is not to condemn mixing (which is a valid, innovative, and practical multilingual practice), but to acknowledge a tension: the very practices that improve communicative efficiency and social cohesion may also lead to unequal lexical advancement among languages, especially when one code prevails in education and digital media. Therefore, the participants' worries about younger generations

might be seen as a local version of language maintenance anxiety. This anxiety is the fear that certain words, ways of speaking, and cultural practices would become less common over time.

The dataset demonstrates that student interaction contains both code-switching and code-mixing as students use these methods to handle different social situations while maintaining their authentic identity and original speaking context. This dual nature is analytically important because it enables the study to progress from measuring switching frequency to demonstrating how switching affects social interactions and shapes future developments in new digital communities.

Conclusion

This study examined pragmatic language choices among Tanzanian and Pakistani undergraduate students, focusing across face-to-face and digitally mediated contexts. Drawing on inductive qualitative analysis, the findings demonstrate that multilingual practices among students are not random or deficient but are shaped by pragmatic reasoning tied to efficiency, identity performance, social alignment, and technological affordances. Across both contexts, students actively deploy linguistic and semiotic resources, languages, scripts, memes, emojis, to manage relationships, humour, stance, and institutional positioning.

At the same time, the analysis reveals that digital pragmatics introduces asymmetrical consequences for different languages. In the Pakistani context, the widespread adoption of Romanised Urdu represents a significant orthographic shift that extends beyond convenience. While Romanisation enables speed, accessibility, and peer-group alignment, it simultaneously reduces sustained engagement with Urdu script and weakens access to indigenous lexical resources. Participants' reported difficulty in recalling original Urdu vocabulary and writing in Urdu script indicates that prolonged reliance on Romanised forms contributes to gradual script attrition and domain-specific lexical erosion, particularly among younger users whose literacy practices are primarily digital.

Similarly, patterns of code-mixing and automated lexical switching across both datasets suggest that multilingual competence is being reconfigured rather than diminished. However, this reconfiguration is uneven: dominant codes such as English increasingly occupy academic, technological, and digital domains, while local languages risk reduced functional depth in these spaces. Students' metapragmatic reflections, especially concerns about younger generations' thinning lexical repertoires, highlight an emerging tension between communicative efficiency and language maintenance. These concerns do not reflect rejection of multilingualism, but rather an awareness that pragmatic adaptations, when repeatedly reinforced by educational systems and digital

infrastructures, can reshape linguistic memory, script familiarity, and long-term language vitality.

The findings demonstrate that pragmatic choice in contemporary multilingual societies extends beyond spoken interaction into writing systems, semiotic modes, and technological environments. Language mixing and code-switching function as powerful interactional tools, but they also operate within broader ideological and infrastructural conditions that privilege certain languages and scripts over others. This study therefore positions pragmatic reasoning as a key mechanism through which digital communication both enables expressive flexibility and produces unintended consequences for linguistic preservation.

The findings of this study carry important theoretical, educational, and technological implications. From a theoretical perspective, the analysis challenges traditional pragmatic models that focus primarily on spoken language by demonstrating that pragmatic choice now operates across scripts, visual modes, and semiotic systems. Orthographic decisions, meme usage, and emoji deployment must be recognised as integral components of pragmatic competence in digitally mediated multilingual interaction. Pragmatic theory must therefore expand to account for how technological affordances shape not only interactional meaning but also language access and retention.

Educationally, the results raise urgent concerns regarding literacy development and language maintenance. While Romanised Urdu and code-mixed practices facilitate everyday communication, their dominance risks weakening students' ability to read, write, and retrieve vocabulary in indigenous scripts and languages. Educational institutions cannot rely solely on spoken proficiency as evidence of linguistic competence. There is a need for pedagogical interventions that consciously reinforce script literacy, vocabulary depth, and functional use of local languages within academic and digital contexts, without framing multilingual practices as errors or deficiencies.

From a policy and technology perspective, the study highlights the role of digital infrastructures in shaping linguistic behaviour. Keyboard design, predictive text systems, transliteration tools, and platform defaults implicitly privilege Roman and English-based inputs, accelerating script displacement. Language preservation efforts must therefore extend beyond classrooms to include technological design choices. Supporting indigenous scripts and languages within digital platforms is essential if multilingual societies are to sustain linguistic diversity in increasingly digital futures.

The study underscores that language mixing and code-switching should not be framed as threats in themselves. The real challenge lies in ensuring that pragmatic adaptability does not come at the cost of long-term linguistic erosion. Balancing communicative efficiency with language preservation requires coordinated attention from educators, policymakers, and technology developers

alike. By foregrounding early empirical evidence from everyday student interaction, this paper contributes to a growing body of work that views multilingual pragmatics not only as a site of innovation, but also as a critical space where the future trajectories of languages are actively negotiated.

Author Contributions

Nasir Razzaq conceived and designed the study, conducted data collection, performed the analysis, and drafted the manuscript. Prof. Casmir M. Rubagumya and Dr. Felician B. Mgimba provided academic supervision, conceptual guidance, and critical feedback throughout the research process. All supervisors reviewed the manuscript and contributed to its intellectual refinement.

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