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# MULTILINGUAL MARGINS: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF CODE-SWITCHING IN CLASSROOM INTERACTIONS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR LINGUISTIC HIERARCHIES

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## Abstract

This research examines the phenomenon of code-switching in multilingual classrooms through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), focusing on how language use in classroom interactions contributes to the maintenance or disruption of linguistic hierarchies. While code-switching has often been viewed from functional or pedagogical perspectives, this study foregrounds its ideological and political dimensions. It analyzes real classroom data from public schools in Lahore, Pakistan, where English, Urdu, and regional languages coexist. The research explores how teachers and students employ code-switching to navigate power structures, assert identities, or adapt to institutional norms. The findings demonstrate that language choices in classroom discourse are not neutral but reflect deeper socio-political structures that position English as dominant and regional languages as subordinate. The study concludes by advocating for inclusive language policies and critical pedagogical approaches that validate multilingualism as a resource for equitable education.

**Keywords:** Code-switching, multilingualism, critical discourse analysis, classroom interaction, linguistic hierarchies, language ideology, education policy

**Introduction**

In postcolonial multilingual societies such as Pakistan, language operates not only as a medium of communication but as a key marker of identity, class, and power. The classroom is a microcosm of society, and linguistic practices within it offer critical insights into broader sociopolitical structures. In this context, code-switching—shifting between languages during communication—emerges as a common practice among teachers and students. However, the implications of code-switching go beyond immediate pedagogical needs; they reflect deeper ideological investments and social hierarchies.

The national language policy in Pakistan recognizes Urdu as the national language and English as an official language, yet more than 70 regional languages are spoken across the country. This linguistic diversity creates complex dynamics in classrooms, where English is often privileged, Urdu serves as the lingua franca, and

regional languages are stigmatized or excluded.

This research seeks to understand how classroom code-switching practices reflect or resist linguistic hierarchies and what this implies for inclusive education. Drawing on CDA, the study examines classroom interactions in selected public schools to reveal the power-laden nature of language choices and their impact on student learning, identity, and equity.

**Research Questions**

1. How is code-switching practiced in multilingual classrooms in Pakistan?
2. What linguistic hierarchies are reproduced or contested through code-switching in classroom discourse?
3. How do teachers and students use code-switching as a discursive tool to negotiate power, identity, and inclusion?
4. What implications do these findings have for language policy and pedagogy in multilingual education systems?

**Research Objectives**

- To investigate the patterns and functions of code-switching in multilingual classrooms.
- To critically analyze the relationship between code-switching and linguistic hierarchies.
- To explore how teachers and students use language choices to assert, challenge, or navigate power relations.
- To suggest pedagogical and policy-level interventions that support equitable multilingual education.

**Literature Review**

**Code-Switching in Educational Contexts**

Code-switching has been examined through various theoretical lenses. Gumperz (1982) introduced it as a communicative strategy that carries social meaning beyond mere translation. In classroom settings, researchers have noted that teachers often switch to students' first languages to clarify content, manage classroom behavior, or establish social connections (Lin, 2008). Martin-Jones (1995) identified code-switching as a pedagogical tool, especially in bilingual and ESL classrooms. However, most of these studies treated code-switching as a value-neutral strategy, overlooking

its ideological implications.

**Language Ideology and Linguistic Hierarchies**

Linguistic hierarchies arise from language ideologies—the beliefs and attitudes about the value, legitimacy, and function of languages in society. Bourdieu (1991) theorized that certain languages become dominant due to their symbolic capital, conferred by political, educational, and economic institutions. In Pakistan, English enjoys high prestige, Urdu serves as a national unifier, while regional languages are often associated with illiteracy or backwardness (Rahman, 2002). These hierarchies become embedded in the education system and are enacted in classroom interactions.

**Critical Discourse Analysis and Multilingualism**

CDA, particularly in the works of Fairclough (1992) and van Dijk (2001), offers tools to uncover how power and ideology are encoded in language. CDA moves beyond surface-level language use to examine how discourses sustain inequality. Canagarajah (1999) applied CDA to English teaching in postcolonial settings, showing how linguistic practices are shaped by colonial legacies. In multilingual classrooms, CDA can reveal how code-switching both reflects and contests the dominance of standard languages.

**Methodology**

**Research Design**

This study employs a **qualitative, interpretive** design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis. It is exploratory and contextual, aiming to understand meaning-making processes rather than measure outcomes.

**Sampling**

The study selected **three urban public schools** in Lahore with diverse linguistic demographics. **Purposive sampling** was used to identify teachers and classrooms where code-switching was prevalent. Participants included:

- 6 Teachers (English, Urdu, Science)
- 40 Students (Grades 6 to 9)
- Language backgrounds: Urdu, Punjabi, Pashto, Saraiki, and Hindko

**Data Collection Methods**

**Classroom Audio Recordings**: Ten sessions (each 35–45 minutes) were recorded and transcribed.

**Field Notes**: Taken during and after classroom visits to capture context, gestures, tone, and interactional dynamics.

**Semi-Structured Interviews**: Conducted with teachers and selected students to understand their language attitudes and intentions behind code-switching.

**Data Analysis**

Following Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional CDA model:

**Textual Analysis**: Examined frequency, structure, and function of code-switching instances.

**Discursive Practice**: Analyzed interactional patterns and classroom roles.

**Social Practice**: Interpreted broader ideological meanings and implications.

**Discussion and Findings**

This section provides a comprehensive analysis of how code-switching practices in multilingual classrooms both reflect and challenge existing linguistic hierarchies. The discussion is organized into sub-themes based on empirical observations, interviews, and field notes, interpreted through the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). These sub-themes highlight how classroom discourse is a site of ideological contestation, pedagogical negotiation, and identity performance.

**Code-Switching as a Pedagogical Strategy: Pragmatism or Necessity?**

In all observed classrooms, teachers frequently code-switched between English, Urdu, and occasionally regional languages such as Punjabi or Saraiki. These shifts were often **intentional, context-driven, and functionally motivated**. Teachers typically initiated lessons in English—the medium mandated by educational policy—particularly when introducing new terms, scientific processes, or grammatical structures. However, when faced with confused expressions or disengaged students, they switched to Urdu or the students' L1 (first language) for clarification.

For instance, a Grade 8 science teacher explained osmosis as follows:

*"Osmosis is the process jab water high concentration se low concentration ki taraf jata hai—yaani paani wahan jata hai jahan uski kami ho."*

Here, English was used to introduce the term, while Urdu and localized explanations ensured comprehension. This shows that **code-switching is not random** but deeply tied to classroom goals: explaining content, checking understanding, managing time, and maintaining flow.

While this pragmatic approach aids in knowledge transmission, it inadvertently reinforces the **symbolic dominance of English**. Teachers position English as the source of "real" knowledge, with Urdu functioning merely as a crutch. Regional languages, if used at all, are reserved for humor or off-task interactions, further marginalizing them in formal learning.

**Reproduction of Linguistic Hierarchies: Prestige, Shame, and Internalized Bias**

A recurring pattern in both discourse and interviews was the privileging of English over all other languages, particularly regional ones. Teachers and students often viewed English as the language of intelligence, success, and modernity. Conversely, speaking Punjabi, Pashto, or Saraiki was seen as backward or inappropriate for academic settings.

A Grade 9 student remarked:

*"When I speak in Punjabi, some friends laugh. It's like I'm not serious or educated."*

This attitude reflects **internalized linguistic shame**, a byproduct of societal ideologies that associate English with upward mobility and regional languages with inferiority. Even teachers—many of whom were themselves from non-English speaking backgrounds—expressed discomfort using their native languages in professional contexts. One teacher noted:

*"I speak Punjabi at home, but not in school. It doesn't feel right here."*

Such sentiments demonstrate how educational institutions act as ideological apparatuses (in Althusserian terms), transmitting dominant norms about language and legitimacy. Code-switching, in this light, becomes a tool not just for pedagogy but for performing compliance with institutional expectations that uphold English as the ideal.

**Identity Negotiation and Linguistic Resistance Among Students**

While most students internalized the hierarchy of English > Urdu > Regional Languages, some consciously or subconsciously **resisted this order** through their language choices. In one case, a Pashto-speaking student consistently responded to the teacher's Urdu questions in Pashto, even when prompted otherwise. Though met with disciplinary remarks, the student later said:

*"Pashto is who I am. Why should I hide it?"*

This act represents **linguistic resistance**—a refusal to erase identity in the face of homogenizing language ideologies. Similarly, in a Grade 7 classroom, a group of

Punjabi-speaking students used their language during group work to **exclude an Urdu-speaking peer**. Here, code-switching served as a gatekeeping mechanism, signaling in-group belonging and othering the outsider.

These instances reveal that code-switching can be both **empowering and exclusionary**. It allows students to assert cultural identity and solidarity but also risks reinforcing linguistic silos. The complexity of these interactions challenges simplistic views of code-switching as inherently inclusive.

**Classroom Authority and the Politics of Code**

Teachers employed code-switching strategically to **modulate their authority**. English was used to convey formality, discipline, and knowledge; Urdu was employed for empathy, clarity, or humor; Punjabi or other local languages, when used, were often for informal bonding or mild scolding.

For example, a teacher scolded a misbehaving student:

*"You are disturbing the whole class. Sharam kar Punjabi puttar, kita kar rahe o?"*

This layered utterance blends English (formal reprimand), Urdu (general communication), and Punjabi (intimate/ethnic solidarity). The mixing of codes here is not just linguistic—it is performative, signaling both authority and cultural alignment. However, the selective use of local languages only in negative or informal contexts may reinforce negative connotations about these tongues. Their absence in "serious" academic content perpetuates their perceived inferiority and limits students' cognitive engagement in their most comfortable languages.

**Institutional Discourses and Teacher Constraints**

Interviews with teachers revealed that their code-switching practices were constrained by institutional pressures. Many were aware of the pedagogical benefits of multilingual strategies but felt compelled to use English predominantly due to policy mandates, administrative expectations, and parental preferences.

One teacher explained:

*"We have to speak English because the principal observes classes. Even if students don't understand, we must show that English is being used."*

This performative use of English, disconnected from actual comprehension, illustrates how language policy can conflict with pedagogical realities. Teachers often engaged in what might be called "symbolic English"—a surface-level display meant

to signal professionalism, rather than genuine educational effectiveness.

Moreover, schools that marketed themselves as "English-medium" discouraged the visible use of Urdu or regional languages, fearing it would tarnish their brand image. In such contexts, code-switching became a hidden or defensive practice, further stigmatizing linguistic diversity rather than normalizing it.

**Implications for Educational Equity and Inclusion**

The findings of this study have serious implications for equitable education. When language hierarchies go unchallenged, students from non-English backgrounds face systemic disadvantages—not just in understanding content but in building confidence, participating in discourse, and developing a sense of belonging.

Although code-switching could serve as a bridge for inclusive learning, its current use often reinforces stratification. Without explicit pedagogical strategies that validate all student languages, schools risk becoming sites of linguistic assimilation rather than inclusion.

Teachers, therefore, require training in critical language awareness—an understanding of how language use intersects with power, identity, and ideology. Policymakers must also rethink the monolingual biases embedded in national education standards, testing systems, and textbook development.

**Conclusion**

This research has shown that code-switching in multilingual classrooms is a complex, ideologically loaded practice that both reflects and shapes linguistic hierarchies. Teachers and students navigate this terrain by using language choices to perform identity, manage authority, and access learning. However, institutional and societal pressures continue to uphold English as the language of prestige, marginalizing regional languages.

To move towards a more equitable education system, language policies and pedagogical practices must shift. Teacher training should include critical language awareness. Curriculum designers must validate multilingual practices. And most importantly, students should be empowered to see their linguistic repertoires as assets, not deficiencies.

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