

Language, Identity, and Power: A Sociolinguistic Inquiry into Code-Switching Practices in South Asian Multilingual Communities

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between language, identity, and power through the lens of code-switching in South Asian multilingual contexts. Adopting a theoretical and interpretive sociolinguistic approach, the study does not rely on empirical or corpus-based data but instead draws on hypothetical and illustrative cases grounded in established sociolinguistic theory. Integrating perspectives from variationist, interactional, and critical sociolinguistics, the paper analyzes how code-switching functions as a communicative resource through which speakers negotiate identity, manage interactional meanings, and engage with symbolic power. The analysis suggests that code-switching in South Asian postcolonial societies cannot be adequately understood through deficit models of bilingualism; rather, it operates as a socially meaningful practice shaped by historical, educational, and ideological hierarchies. By conceptualizing code-switching as a dynamic and situated practice, the study highlights its implications for language policy, pedagogy, and debates on identity and power in multilingual societies.

Keywords: Code-switching, Multilingualism, Sociolinguistics, Identity construction, Symbolic power,

INTRODUCTION

Sociolinguistics is concerned with the relationship between language and society, particularly the ways in which linguistic choices reflect social structures, cultural norms, and power relations. One of the most prominent phenomena in multilingual contexts is code-switching, commonly defined as the alternation between two or more languages or

linguistic varieties within a single interaction. Earlier linguistic traditions often viewed such alternation as evidence of linguistic interference or incomplete competence. However, contemporary sociolinguistic scholarships increasingly recognize code-switching as a systematic, purposeful, and socially meaningful practice.

In South Asian multilingual societies, including Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, code-switching is deeply embedded in everyday communication. The alternation between English and local languages such as Urdu, Hindi, or Bengali is not random; rather, it reflects broader postcolonial hierarchies in which English continues to function as a language of education, governance, and socioeconomic mobility. Within these contexts, linguistic choices become closely tied to identity formation, social positioning, and access to symbolic capital.

Rather than treating code-switching as a linguistic deficiency, recent research conceptualizes it as a communicative resource that speakers use to negotiate belonging, authority, and solidarity. Through language alternation, speakers can index multiple identities simultaneously, professional, cultural, generational, or regional, depending on interactional goals and social context. These practices are particularly significant in postcolonial societies, where tensions between global aspirations and local identities remain pronounced.

From a critical sociolinguistic perspective, code-switching is not ideologically neutral. Choices to switch into English or a local language may reproduce or challenge existing power relations, especially in institutional settings such as classrooms. As such, code-switching becomes a site where symbolic power is exercised, negotiated, and sometimes resisted. This study situates code-switching within South Asian multilingual environments to examine how language alternation mediates identity construction and power relations in everyday and institutional interactions.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze code-switching as a sociolinguistic resource for identity construction in South Asian multilingual contexts.
2. To examine how code-switching mediates power relations in institutional and everyday interactions.

Research Questions

1. How does code-switching facilitate identity negotiation in South Asian multilingual communities?
2. In what ways does code-switching reflect and mediate power relations in social and institutional settings?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Code-switching has today become accepted as an orderly and significant linguistic activity in the multilingual discourse; however, initial literature described it as a linguistic interference or a linguistic deficiency (Weinreich, 1953). Later functional and sociolinguistic studies have rejected this deficit paradigm, but much of the literature underpinning it still generalizes Western bilingual paradigms so that they cannot be used to analyze the postcolonial multilingual situations, including that of South Asia (Sahni, 2025). In South African cultures, code-switching is not just a communicative act, but a culturally

instantiated modality that is conditioned by colonial histories, stratified school systems, and unequal distributions of symbolic capital (George & Chakkanattu, 2025).

Variationist, interactional, and critical models have contributed to a better comprehension of code-switching, but their areas of explanation differ significantly when applied outside the Western contexts. Following the paradigm put forward by Labov, variationist sociolinguistics predicts systematic alternation patterns that are attributable to sociolinguistic variables, which provide a rich source of information on linguistic regularity, but in general regard language choice as socially indexed but not produced historically (Labov, 1972). In comparison, interactional sociolinguistics anticipates moment-to-moment meaning-making activities thus explaining why speakers use code-switching to negotiate conversational lexicon and social will (Gumperz, 1982). However, these two paradigms are also prone to give preference to the interaction at the micro-level or the measurable variation therefore, providing limited access to the colonial power relations which form the basis of linguistic hierarchies in South Asia. It is the aim of critical sociolinguistics, typified by the work of Fairclough (1995) and Pennycook (2010), to fill this gap by locating linguistic alternation within ideological and political economies of scale; but even these models are regularly based on the example of Euro-American or globally globalised urban settings, not on empirically based South-Asian interaction data (Sahni, 2025).

This theoretical asymmetry can be also observed through comparative studies of identity construction. The findings of empirical research carried throughout various multilingual contexts confirm that code-switching is associated with the process of bargaining between hybridized identities and social positing (George 2025). Switching between global modernity and local authenticity, Hinglish, Urdu-English, and Bengali English switching can be considered one of the variants in the South Asian milieu. Despite acknowledging English as a storehouse of symbolic capital, which measures educational achievement and mobility, the literature that has thus far been produced on postcolonial studies often describes this dynamic in a purely descriptive way, without theorizing the ways in which colonial legacies institutionalize unequal access to linguistic legitimacy (Pennycook, 2010). As a result, identity-oriented studies are likely to romanticise hybridity and pay too little attention to the structural imperatives that determine it.

In a similar manner, sociolinguistic analyses of social relations prefigure solidarity and group membership as two major causes of code-switching (Gumperz, 1982), but South Asian studies show functions which are more stratified. Shakir and Deuber (2024) reveal that linguistic variation is often used to mark off class, city privilege, and educational capital, particularly among young generations in Pakistan and India. Unlike in the Western situation of bi-lingualism, where code-switching is commonly used to express co-identity, the South Asian practice in this matter can be used both to draw in and to exclude to further reinforce social distance despite being used to signify cosmopolitan belonging. Such an ambivalence is not adequately theorised in the existing sociolinguistic canon.

The construct of linguistic capital developed by Bourdieu provides a rich critical approach, but when it is applied to the South Asian code-switching, it is characterized by a significant level of unequal distribution. Although researchers acknowledge that English is a prestige resource, which is inseparable to colonial education systems (Fairclough, 1995), comparatively little research questions the possibility of indigenising movements resisting and positioning itself strategically in response to the elite discourses at the same time (George & Chakkanattu, 2025). Such dynamics are often portrayed in well-known literature

by means of institutional or media artefacts and thus quotidian practices of interaction have not yet been explored (Sahni, 2025).

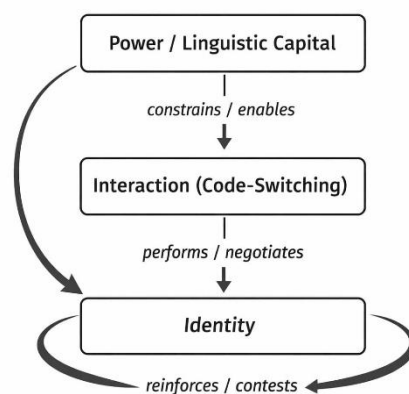
This lacuna is further emphasized by pedagogical scholarship. Translanguaging models popularize mobile linguistic practice in the classroom, thus challenging the concept of monolingualism (Shakir & Deuber, 2024). However, much of the literature promulgate policy-focused or normative positions and little theorisation is given regarding how South Asian colonial language hierarchies shape classroom interaction. In this respect, code-switching can be unintentionally described in terms of a neutral tool by the pedagogical discourse, instead of considering it as a practice that is permanently embedded in the unequal relations of power (Fairclough, 1995).

Despite the increased academic attention, studies of code-switching are skewed towards Western or globalised contexts. South Asian multilingualism with multi-layered histories of colonisation, nationalism and language stratification stays theoretically peripheral and not part of fundamental sociolinguistic theorisation (George & Chakkanattu, 2025). The available literature has a weak theorization of the relationship between code-switching, cultural capital, and the postcolonial identity formation, often taking models developed outside the region without proper contextual adaptation (Sahni, 2025).

Taken together, although both variationist, interactional, and critical paradigms have added to the empirical research on code-switching, they lack the ability to explain the historical and ideological specificities of South Asian situations. The current work addresses these shortcomings by projecting postcolonial multilingualities into the future and questioning code-switching as a form of practice as a process of identity negotiation, social mobility, and unequal access to linguistic capital in South Asia.

METHOD

The study uses a theoretical-interpretive qualitative approach based on sociolinguistic analysis and is based on hypothetical and exemplary interactional instances instead of empirical evidence, linguistic corpus, or fieldwork. The intentional deployment of imaginary information is a theoretical-illustrative tool which clarifies analytic ideas and puts into question the explanatory scope of existing sociolinguistic theories, a method that has long been comfortable in theoretical sociolinguistics (Cameron, 2001). The research is not represented as an empirical or statistical generalisation but instead attempts to illuminate the concept in terms of the way code switching can be used to negotiate identity as well as regulate symbolic power in postcolonial South Asian situations. This method is sharply contrasted with corpus-based studies - which focus more on frequency and the distributional patterns - and with ethnographic studies - which focus more on the naturally occurring interaction and on the participant attitudes. The synthesis of both the variationist, the interactional, and the critical sociolinguistics approaches makes the methodology allow a specific theoretical critique of the existing codifications of code-switching, as well as anticipates the failure of the existing models when applied to the South Asian multilingual contexts.



Theoretical Framework

This study conceptualizes code-switching not as linguistic interference but as a communicative resource embedded in social, cultural, and political contexts. To capture its multifaceted nature, the research draws on three complementary sociolinguistic traditions: variationist sociolinguistics, interactional sociolinguistics, and critical sociolinguistics. Together, these frameworks provide structural, conversational, and ideological lenses through which code-switching in South Asian multilingual environments can be analyzed (Sahni, 2025; George & Chakkanattu, 2025).

Variationist Sociolinguistics

Variationist sociolinguistics, pioneered by Labov (1972), emphasizes the systematic relationship between linguistic variation and social stratification. Within this tradition, code-switching is understood as patterned behavior that correlates with variables such as class, education, and region. For instance, studies in South Asia demonstrate that alternation between English and local languages often indexes socioeconomic status and educational background (Shakir & Deuber, 2024). By applying variationist principles, this study situates code-switching within broader patterns of linguistic distribution, highlighting how structural choices reflect social positioning.

Interactional Sociolinguistics

Interactional sociolinguistics, developed by Gumperz (1982), focuses on the conversational functions of language alternation. Code-switching is viewed as a pragmatic strategy that manages coherence, signals topic shifts, and conveys politeness or humor. In South Asian discourse, Hinglish and Urdu-English alternation often serve as contextualization cues, enabling speakers to navigate complex social interactions (George & Chakkanattu, 2025). This framework underscores the micro-level dynamics of communication, showing how code-switching contributes to conversational flow and relational management.

Critical Sociolinguistics

Critical sociolinguistics situates language within power relations and ideological structures. Fairclough (1995) argues that linguistic practices reproduce social inequalities, while Pennycook (2010) emphasizes the local negotiation of global linguistic ideologies. In

South Asia, English functions as symbolic capital, indexing modernity and prestige, whereas local languages affirm authenticity and solidarity (Sahni, 2025). Code-switching thus becomes a site of ideological struggle, where speakers simultaneously reinforce and resist hierarchies. This perspective is crucial for understanding how language alternation mediates identity politics and cultural capital in postcolonial societies.

Integrative Perspective

While each framework offers distinct insights, their integration provides a holistic understanding of code-switching. Variationist approaches reveal structural patterns; interactional approaches highlight conversational functions; and critical approaches foreground issues of power and identity. Together, they allow this study to analyze code-switching as a multi-dimensional practice that operates at structural, pragmatic, and ideological levels (George & Chakkanattu, 2025).

Conceptual Model for Study

The conceptual model guiding this research positions code-switching as a dynamic strategy that simultaneously:

- Indexes identity (variationist lens).
- Maintains conversational coherence (interactional lens).
- Negotiates symbolic power (critical lens).

This tripartite framework enables the study to interpret code-switching in South Asian multilingual environments as both a micro-level conversational resource and a macro-level sociopolitical practice.

By synthesizing variationist, interactional, and critical sociolinguistic perspectives, this study establishes a robust theoretical foundation for analyzing code-switching. These frameworks collectively illuminate how language alternation reflects social structures, manages interpersonal relationships, and mediates power. Grounding the analysis in these traditions ensures that the study captures the complexity of code-switching as a communicative resource in pluralistic societies.

FINDINGS AND DIS

Code-switching occupies a contested position in both sociolinguistic scholarship and public discourse, oscillating between stigmatization and strategic valuation. While early prescriptive approaches framed language alternation as deficiency, contemporary sociolinguistics recognizes code-switching as a structured, context-sensitive practice embedded in social meaning-making. In postcolonial multilingual societies such as South Asia, code-switching must be understood not only as interactional choice but as a historically conditioned semiotic resource shaped by colonial legacies, institutional hierarchies, and unequal access to linguistic capital.

Rather than treating languages as bounded systems, this analysis adopts a repertoire-based view of multilingualism (Blommaert, 2010), foregrounding how speakers mobilize linguistic resources to negotiate identity, power, and interactional goals. The discussion below examines code-switching as identity performance, a site of power negotiation and resistance, a communicative-cognitive strategy, and a socially contested practice with policy implications.

Code-Switching, Identity, and Interaction

Identity is treated here as interactionally produced rather than pre-given. In South Asian contexts, language choice is tightly linked to class, education, and institutional belonging. When a speaker proposes, *“Aaj meeting English mein rakhtay hain, taake presentation formal lagay,”* English indexes professionalism and bureaucratic legitimacy, aligning the speaker with elite institutional norms. Drawing on Silverstein’s (2003) indexicality, the choice of English performs a professional identity rather than merely describing one.

Conversely, a shift to *“apni zaban”* invokes solidarity and shared cultural belonging, constructing intimacy through exclusion of outsiders. These switches do not represent contradictory identities but illustrate how multilingual speakers navigate overlapping social positions. Code-switching thus functions as a **constitutive practice** through which identities are momentarily stabilized, contested, or reconfigured (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

Power, Overt Resistance, and Symbolic Resistance

Code-switching provides a clear window into how power circulates through everyday interaction. In postcolonial institutions, English functions as symbolic capital, granting authority, legitimacy, and access to institutional resources. For example, a teacher’s instruction, *“Please answer in English”* – does more than regulate language choice; it enforces a hierarchy in which English proficiency is equated with intelligence, discipline, and academic competence. Students who are fluent in English are positioned as legitimate participants, while others are implicitly marked as deficient. Here, power operates through normalization rather than coercion, embedding linguistic hierarchy into routine classroom interaction.

In some cases, speakers engage in overt resistance, directly challenging these norms. For instance, a student who responds, *“Sir, main English mein explain nahi kar sakta, Urdu mein kehne dein”* (“I can’t explain this in English; let me say it in Urdu”) explicitly contests the institutional expectation of English-only discourse. This act confronts authority by questioning the legitimacy of the policy itself and seeks to renegotiate the terms of participation. Such resistance is visible, confrontational, and carries potential consequences, making it relatively rare in tightly regulated institutional settings.

More commonly, resistance takes a symbolic form. When a student whispers to a peer, *“Yaar mujhay samajh nahi aayi,”* the switch to the local language does not openly oppose institutional authority but creates an alternative communicative space of emotional honesty and peer solidarity. This symbolic resistance operates beneath the surface of official discourse, allowing speakers to reclaim agency without risking sanction. Rather than rejecting power outright, it momentarily suspends it, revealing how speakers navigate constraints through subtle linguistic choices. The distinction is crucial: overt resistance seeks to alter power structures, whereas symbolic resistance enables survival and affective relief within them.

At the same time, code-switching can reinforce inequality rather than disrupt it. Consider an elite speaker who alternates seamlessly between English and a local language during a formal meeting, using English to assert expertise and switching to the local language to build rapport. This strategic flexibility enhances their symbolic mobility, allowing them to dominate multiple social fields simultaneously. In contrast, speakers with limited access to English cannot exploit code-switching in the same way, remaining

structurally marginalized. Resistance, therefore, is unevenly distributed, underscoring that code-switching is not inherently emancipatory but shaped by access to linguistic resources.

Communicative and Cognitive Dimensions

Beyond power relations, code-switching functions as a communicative and cognitive strategy that enhances meaning-making. In pedagogical contexts, speakers often introduce abstract or technical concepts in English and then shift to the local language for explanation: *"Woh concept simple hai – bas ek tarah ka comparison."* This alternation reduces cognitive load by linking unfamiliar terminology to familiar linguistic frames, facilitating comprehension rather than hindering it.

Code-switching also intensifies emphasis and emotional expression. A bilingual repetition such as *"This is very important – bohot zaroori baat hai"* reinforces urgency through semantic duplication across languages. Similarly, emotional states are often articulated more precisely in a first language, as in *"I'm really upset – yaar bohot bura lag raha hai."* These shifts are not accidental but reflect speakers' intuitive awareness of how different linguistic resources carry different affective and pragmatic weights. Such practices align with the view of code-switching as a contextualization cue that organizes discourse and guides interpretation, rather than fragmenting it.

Societal Attitudes and Policy Implications

Despite its communicative effectiveness, code-switching remains ideologically contested in public discourse. Language mixing is frequently criticized as cultural erosion or linguistic impurity, echoing colonial and nationalist ideologies that privilege monolingual norms. At the same time, English-dominant code-switching is celebrated in corporate, media, and urban youth spaces as a marker of modernity and prestige. These contradictory attitudes reveal how linguistic practices are evaluated through classed and colonial lenses rather than communicative function.

Such attitudes directly shape policy outcomes. Monolingual language policies in education and governance institutionalize stigma around code-switching, framing it as a problem to be corrected rather than a resource to be leveraged. This disconnect between lived multilingual practice and official language planning reinforces exclusion and linguistic insecurity. Conversely, the growing normalization of hybrid language use in media and popular culture points toward the possibility of more flexible, inclusive language policies. Recognizing code-switching as an integral feature of multilingual life is therefore essential for aligning policy with social reality.

Implications

Understanding code-switching as an interactional, ideological, and political practice has important implications. Language policies grounded in monolingualism risk marginalizing multilingual speakers, while educational practices that strategically accommodate code-switching can enhance comprehension and equity. More broadly, code-switching provides a critical lens for examining how identity, power, and resistance are negotiated in postcolonial societies, revealing the limits of existing sociolinguistic models that under-theorize structural inequality.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that code-switching in multilingual societies functions as a systematic and socially meaningful practice rather than a marker of linguistic deficiency. By examining code-switching through the lenses of identity negotiation, power relations, and interactional strategy, the analysis demonstrates how language alternation enables speakers to navigate institutional authority, express solidarity, and reconcile competing social identities within postcolonial contexts. In South Asia, these practices are shaped by unequal linguistic hierarchies, making code-switching a site where both symbolic power and symbolic resistance are enacted in everyday interaction. At the same time, the study is limited by its theoretical and illustrative scope. The use of hypothetical data does not allow for empirical generalization or claims about frequency and distribution across speech communities. Future research would benefit from complementing this approach with ethnographic, interactional, or corpus-based studies that examine naturally occurring code-switching practices across diverse South Asian settings. Such work could further explore how institutional policies, generational change, and media practices influence language alternation over time. Overall, recognizing code-switching as a communicative resource rather than a problem has important implications for sociolinguistic inquiry, educational practice, and language policy. Approaches that align institutional norms with multilingual realities are more likely to promote inclusion, equity, and meaningful participation in linguistically diverse societies.

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