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Scrolling in English: Linguistic Trends in Pakistani TikTok Captions

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of English in TikTok captions in Pakistan, emphasising how only English captions function as a tool for global visibility, identity construction, and audience engagement and reach, based on previous sociolinguistic work this study interrogates why creators cannot maximise both global status and local inclusion at the same time with captions. Data were collected from 130 TikTok posts that contained captions in English-only and 90 mixed-language captions with attention to digital sociolinguistic, code switching, and qualitative discourse analysis. The finding reveals that English in captions performs several communicative functions: it enhances branding and monetisation across local and global audiences, it reflects a symbol of prestige and modernity, and enables natural English acquisition, but at the same time it risks excluding a large part of their local audience who do not understand English fully and it seems like the creator is being artificial. The study concludes, that the role of English in TikTok captions plays a dual role, on one hand they give creators global reach, prestige, and a modern image, but looking from another angle, they risk leaving out local audiences who feel closer to Urdu or mixed captions. This shows how language selection reflects the creator's ability to balance identity with audience connection.

Keywords: English captions, TikTok, communicative functions, identity construction.

Introduction

The switch in communication, knowledge sharing, links and identity expression has been made possible through social media in recent times (Barton & Lee, 2013; Tagg, 2015). For instance, TikTok has made a huge impact in Pakistan's youth culture where it has become a source of entertainment, a platform for showing one's creative side, and a means of personal expression. The users of TikTok can make short films and meet up with people from neighbouring countries and the rest of the world. Although the videos are the main attraction on the platform, the captions that go along with them also have a significant impact on how meaning, identity, and audience involvement are created (Page, 2012; Kress, 2010). Captions are short written texts that can be a description of the video, comment on it, or even add humour to it. Moreover, they are one of the few linguistic elements on TikTok thus their role

in communication and visibility is crucial in an environment otherwise dominated by sound and visuals.

In Pakistan, the situation is different for the caption language in TikTok; this is because it is a country with multiple languages, Urdu and English being the most dominant ones. A good number of Pakistani Tiktokers prefer to caption in English while others resort to a mix of English and Urdu. This linguistic option is not arbitrary, rather it reflects the social meanings and values associated with each language in Pakistan (Rahman, 1996; Mahboob, 2003). The society perceives English as linked to prestige, education, and modernity whereas Urdu is seen as representing culture, local identity, and emotional proximity. Depending on their choice of language, or the way they combine the two, the creators reveal their self-perceptions and the audience they want to attract. Therefore, the use of English in TikTok captions can be very illuminating for understanding how globalisation and digital culture shape language use, identity, and representation in Pakistan (Pennycook, 2007; Androutsopoulos, 2014). English holds an extraordinary position in the linguistic landscape of Pakistan. Even though it is not the first language of the masses, it has gained social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). It is the language of the government, business, and higher education, and it is often linked with the upper and educated classes. The ability to learn and speak English is considered a sign of intelligence, wealth, and cosmopolitanism. Conversely, it is also a language of exclusion as people from rural or economically disadvantaged backgrounds often lack proficiency in it (Warsi, 2014). This dual character prestigious yet exclusionary being powerful makes English an important subject very interesting subject in sociolinguistic research and especially in digital communication where language choice is open, and users are strategic in their selection. TikTok creates a perfect environment to observe such linguistic dynamics. Unlike Facebook and Twitter, TikTok is centered on short visual content with minimal text, which makes the caption a small yet powerful linguistic tool (Kress, 2010). Firstly, TikTok differs from Facebook or Twitter in the writing style because it is all about visual and short video communication with little text. Consequently, the caption becomes somewhat of a small yet very powerful linguistic tool. Creators use captions to attract the attention, describe the video, express emotions or build a personal brand (Page, 2012). The choice of words can affect the number of viewers or the level of interaction with the video. For Pakistani creators who wish to capture a larger or international audience, opting for English may be the best choice. English captions not only help to overcome the language barrier for the global viewers but also attract foreign followers and grant a video more likelihood of getting onto the "For You" page in different countries. Hence, the creators are not only exposed to a larger audience but also to the possibility of making money, given that the global reach could mean sponsorships, collaborations, and monetisation. However, this choice also presents challenges English captions helps visibility, but they exclude local audiences who feel more comfortable with Urdu or mixed language captions. Many viewers feel a stronger connection when the creator uses Urdu, as it reflects daily life, humour and cultural references (Bilal et al., 2012; Scollon & Scollon, 2001). The creators' alignment with such trends is even more pronounced through TikTok that, while being a source of fun, occupies a more serious place in the social identity construction process. For the majority of the young population in Pakistan, English subtitles signify their aspiration to be part of a modern, international community that values creativity, confidence, and communication skills. On the other hand, the English captions act as a link that connects different viewers. A lot of the Pakistani content creators want not only locals to watch their videos but also people from other regions, particularly South Asia, the Middle East, and the overseas communities

of the expatriates. Writing in English is a way for them to make their content accessible to a wider audience. The multilingual audience is a significant part of TikTok culture, where videos spread fast and far beyond national borders. Thus, English becomes not only a means of self-promotion but also a means of connection. Creators through captions dictate how they would like others to perceive them, whether as comedians, fashion influencers, motivational speakers, or entertainers (Bila et al., 2012). At the same time, these barriers still come beside with this option. On the one hand, English captions guide global viewers, but on the other, they at intervals make the content less emotional or more spaced or separated to the local audience. English, meanwhile, can seem formal or disconnected from local realities. For example, captions like "Feeling blessed today, Alhumdulliah" or "Vibes on point, Yaar!" shows how young Pakistanis naturally mix languages. This blending illustrates translingual practices, where speakers use multiple linguistic resources creatively to express identity (Canagarajah, 2013). It is common for social media to exhibit the same language that exists in real life, where English and Urdu not only coexist but also interact. It also suggests that language is not just a tool for communication but also a significant indicator of identity, attitude, and social values. Globalisation and digital culture also influence how English is used on TikTok. English is often combined with Global internet slang, abbreviations, and emojis, making captions appear modern and trend (Pennycook, 2007). Words like "POV," "mood," "vibes," or "literally me" are common among Pakistani Tiktokers. When combined with Urdu words, they form a unique hybrid digital language a style that is modern yet culturally grounded. Such manifestation indicates a combined connected culture that leads the youth of various nations. The exclusive Pakistani touch, although, is acquired from the strange combining and merging of these global terms with local words. It illustrates that the youth are not directly following the West's popular styles; rather they are creatively modifying them to fit their culture. TikTok captions also play an important role in forming virtual identity. Some creators use English to appear confident or professional especially when promoting brands or seeking collaborations (Goffman, 1959). Others mix English with local humour and cultural references to appear relatable and authentic. Thus language becomes a tool for self branding and identity construction. (Hall, 1996; Page, 2012). Overuse of English, however, may detach the content from local culture. Some creators avoid Urdu to appear "global," which makes their videos feel less genuine to Pakistani viewers. Therefore, many creators strategically balance English and Urdu depending on whether they aim for wider visibility or deeper local connection. From a sociolinguistic perspective, TikTok offers valuable insights into how languages coexist, compete and live in a globalised digital world. English on Pakistani TikTok reflects not only power and prestige but also linguistic creativity and identity negotiation (Androutsopoulos, 2014). The ongoing changes demonstrate that the language of social media is dynamic and shaped by technology, culture and society.

Aims and Objectives:

The aim of this research is to inspect how English-sole presents on TikTok contributes to digital identity composition, audience engagement, and global prominence among Pakistani users.

1. to search how English captions help creators reach an international or multilingual audience
2. to evaluate how English-only captions influence authenticity for the local Pakistani viewers
3. to acknowledge the impact of globalisation and digital culture on language preferences in TikTok captions
4. To examine how English captions shape self-representation and fundamental identity

Hypotheses

H1: English captions assist Pakistani TikTok creators outreach a wider global audience.

H2: Over-dependence on English reduces emotional understanding for local viewers.

H3: English–Urdu captions give rise to higher engagement than English-only captions.

Research Questions

1. How do English captions create the prominence and popularity of Pakistani TikTokers?
2. How do English captions impart to establishing virtual specifications on TikTok?
3. How does using English-only versus mixing English and Urdu influence audience participation?
4. What part do globalisation and digital culture play in determining English caption use in Pakistan?

To sum up, English subtitles on TikTok in Pakistan indicate the intricate matter of globalisation, language and identity. English is a medium through which the creators can have the international audience, get popularity, and present themselves as modern and educated. However, it also brings out the difference between the haves (those who can speak and write in English) and the have-nots (those who are not fluent in the English language). Conversely, Urdu is the language that keeps the content close to the audience and rich in culture. Hence, a lot of creators rely on both languages for effective communication with their wide-ranging audiences. This mixed approach not only boosts interaction but also illustrates the real multilingual essence of Pakistan.

Literature Review:

The advent of social media has significantly altered people's interaction, information sharing, and identity expressing in contemporary society. Among different platforms, TikTok has been the most powerful influence, especially among the Pakistani youth. It has evolved into a medium where the users not only amuse others but also shape and exhibit their identities. The capability of TikTok to connect the users is established through its caption, a text of a few words by which users can express their feelings, humour, or give context to the video. Even though the app mainly focuses on visuals and sounds, captions are still among the most prominent factors that influence users and their meaning-making process, and subsequently also their audiences. In multilingual countries like Pakistan where both English and Urdu are the main languages, the choice of language in captions has far-reaching social and cultural implications. Tension surrounds the use of English among other socio-linguistic factors in Pakistan. Among the people where it is not the first language it still prevails and still has a high prestige and power. As pointed out by experts such as Rahman (1996) and Mahboob (2003), English is very strong in the domains of government, higher education, and social mobility. It is linked to being modern, cognitively strong, and of a high social class. Nevertheless, this linkage also leads to a class split, since those with no access to good education often lack the proficiency in English, thus entrenching the linguistic hierarchy. TikTok, being a digital space, reflects this divide in the language practice of the people making the content. The use of English captions by the creator places him/her as educated, modern, and globally connected while it also shows the creator's desire for a sophisticated identity. The other side of the coin is the employment of Urdu which indicates a strong emotional bond, a sense of cultural belonging, and being true to oneself. Urdu is the language used in everyday life, in jokes, and in the sharing of cultural experiences. Consequently, by using Urdu or mixing it with English, the TikTok creators not only reach the local feelings but also create a community. The presence of both languages on TikTok is a reflection of the linguistic diversity in Pakistan and the process of putting one's local identity up against the global one. The doing of code-

switching between both languages is not a mere whim but rather, it indicates how the creators see themselves socially and culturally in the virtual world. Researchers like Androutsopoulos (2014) and Barton and Lee (2013) suggest that choosing a language on social media is an identity performance act where people identify themselves through the use of certain linguistic styles. The impact of globalisation has been very significant on the linguistic practices in digital media as well. The usage of English as the all encompassing language of the internet unlocks the doors for Pakistani Tiktokers to go out of their country and be seen and understood by the World. Creators are trying to be part of the global digital culture through the use of English in their captions, a culture that appreciates trends, aesthetics, and humour that are not confined to local contexts. However, the youth in Pakistan do not fully surrender to the Western influence; they often partake in linguistic hybridisation through which they mix the global internet slang with the local expressions. Expressions like "Vibes on point, yaar" or "Feeling blessed, Alhamdulillah" show that the combination of English and Urdu has resulted in the formation of a new linguistic style that is both modern and rooted in culture. This is what Canagarajah (2013) calls translingual practice whereby the speakers are continually mixing languages to assert their identity in getting the best of both worlds. Captions on TikTok are tools for self-presentation and branding at the same time. The creators predominantly use English captions to demonstrate their confidence, professionalism, and international appeal, especially in the case of brand collaborations or when targeting the global audience. On the other hand, the use of Urdu or mixed language captions helps them to connect with local viewers emotionally and to be authentic. Thus, the language of captions is a strategic choice that determines how creators will be viewed by different audiences. Page (2012) and Lee (2014) argue that the written texts in social media contexts often have indexical meanings—they reveal user's social background, aspirations, and group affiliations with a certain degree of intimacy. In Pakistan, English captions signal sophistication and the tendency toward upward mobility, whereas Urdu captions signal cultural intimacy and local belonging. Although, the absolute dependency on English captions does appear with some shortcomings. It does make the content feel somewhat distant emotionally to the local audience while at the same time, it greatly increases the chances of global visibility and sponsorship opportunities. Many viewers in Pakistan find Urdu very relatable and it does resonate with their humour, expressions, and cultural references. Therefore, overuse of English may cause a decline in the perception of local authenticity. Sociolinguistic research, such as those conducted by Bourdieu (1991) and Warsi (2014), has shown that linguistic capital—such as fluency in English—has the power to reproduce social inequalities rather than to eliminate them. In the case of TikTok, it might lead to blocking the way between the more affluent urban, educated creators and the poorer rural or less privileged audiences. TikTok captions are tools for self-expression and branding at the same time. The indicators on the whole select for English captions as a way to reveal their boldness, courage, professionalism, and worldwide attraction, especially when it comes to brand collaborations or when aiming for the global audience. On the contrary, using Urdu or a combination of both languages allows them to reach the local audiences on an emotional level and be real and genuine. Therefore, the language of captions is a tactic that influences the perception of creators by various audiences. Page (2012) and Lee (2014) state that written texts in social media often carry indexical meanings—they expose the user's social background, aspirations, and group affiliations with a certain level of intimacy. In the case of Pakistan, English captions imply sophistication and the desire for upward mobility, whereas Urdu captions imply cultural intimacy and local belonging. On the other hand, total dependency on English captions carries

some disadvantages with it. It does help the content seem more universal and less emotionally engaging to the local audience yet at the same time it does very much increase the probability of global recognition and sponsorship opportunities. A lot of viewers in Pakistan find Urdu to be very relatable, and it does correspond with their humour, expressions, and cultural references. Hence, excessive use of English might lead to a decline in the perception of local authenticity. Sociolinguistic studies, such as those of Bourdieu (1991) and Warsi (2014), have shown that linguistic capital, such as proficiency in English, has the ability to perpetuate rather than to eradicate social inequalities. In the case of TikTok, it may result in the establishment of a barrier between the urban, educated, affluent creators and the rural, less privileged, or less educated audience.

Methodology:

This study engages qualitative research design established in the concepts of digital sociolinguistics and discourse analysis. The main goal is to inspect how English used either alone or in combination with Urdu structures status building, public interplay, and global visibility in TikTok captions created by Pakistani users. The methodological approach integrates corpus-based observation, thematic analysis, and sociolinguistic interpretation to understand the communicative functions and symbolic value of English on social media

Data Analysis:

The data consisted of TikTok captions collected over a three-month period from publicly accessible posts. All wording or caption was recorded, registered and cataloged according to language choice (English-only or English-Urdu mix), tone, quality and communicative purpose. The survey followed qualitative discourse-analytic procedures illuminated by theories of code-switching indexicality, and translingual practices (Canagarajah, 2013; Androutsopoulos, 2014). By means of this framework, the study explore how captions protect specification, sign social positioning, and create commitment with audiences. Moreover, thematic analysis was implemented to identify reappearing motivations behind language selection —such as signalling modernity, novelty engaging to global audiences, or maintaining cultural connection. Audience engagement markers (likes, comments, shares) were noted only to support qualitative interpretations and not as a primary quantitative measure.

Quantitative Corpus:

Although this study is predominantly qualitative, a small quantitative corpus was developed to organise and classify the captions. A total of 220 TikTok captions were compiled: 130 captions in English only 90 captions in mixed English-Urdu language. This corpus allowed an initial numerical understanding of linguistic tendencies on Pakistani TikTok and supported later qualitative interpretation. The metadata included genre categories (comedy, lifestyle, fashion, motivational content), which provided a diverse linguistic sample.

Qualitative Interpretation:

The qualitative interpretation phase examined how English functions symbolically and socially within TikTok discourse. Findings indicate that English is often used to index modernity, sophistication, and global connectedness. In different -language captions, English normally emphasis basic and fundamental ideas, emotions, or taglines, while Urdu sustains cultural fondness, simplicity, familiarity, and humour. The discourse analysis revealed: English give rise to personal development by projecting confidence, determination and aspirational self-presentation. Though various language captions reinforce understanding, connection and audience intimacy, caption strategies and plans often indicate creators' attempts to balance local specification with global interest.

Comparative Interpretation:

A comparative and qualified explanation of solely in English versus diverse language captions displayed clear diversities in communicative purpose and audience adaptation: Therefore English Only Captions: Highlights global recognition and modern, urban and civil identity. Attract extensive audiences, mainly when creators' goal to appear internationally closely connected. Sometimes generate gap from viewers who are more confident and comfortable with Urdu. However, Mixed English Urdu captions encourage cultural proximity and local commitment, reflect and blend identities determined by both global and local influences.

Findings and Discussion:

The conclusions of this study unfold that caption language on Pakistani TikTok employs as a socially imposed discourse practice rather than an objective communicative option. Through a combination of corpus observation and Critical Discourse Analysis, it became clear and evident that English only captions and English Urdu combined captions establish different ideologies and locate settings for creators. The 130 English only captions in the corpus showed recurring dependency on globally communicating lexical items such as *mood*, *POV*, *vibes*, and *literally me*, indicating positioning with worldwide and global internet culture. These repeated lexical patterns mirror what Fairclough (1995) describes as "language shaped by broader socio-cultural orders," where the linguistic style mirrors the standards and norms of dominant global digital communities. The English corpus also flourished minimal and basic use of emotive markers or illocutionary markers, suggesting an identity and integrity performance rooted in aesthetic novelty and ambitious global association. In contrast, the 90 mixed language captions disclosed recurring variations between English classifications and Urdu cultural markers, generating a mixed discourse. Expressions such as *Alhamdulillah*, *yaar*, *dil khush hogaya*, and *scene on frequently* emerged beside English slang. In corpus terms, this sequence indicates a high coincidence rate of Urdu emotional vocabulary with English trend and tendency focused vocabulary. The importance of these combinations corresponds with Canagarajah's (2013) concept of translingual practice, where multilingual users mixed linguistic service to deal identity across projecting social worlds. This hybrid style not only considers linguistic creativity and originality but also translates a culturally established digital identity that speaks coincidentally to global contribution and local belonging. The CDA point of view further emphasizes the ideological and theoretical work rooted in these caption choices. English only captions regularly positioned the creator as autonomous, self-focused, self-centred and globally connected. This corresponds to van Dijk's (2006) notion of "self-presentation strategies," where discourse is used to project desirable traits here, confidence, cosmopolitanism, and digital fluency. At the same time, mixed captions established a more relational and cooperative facade. Urdu terms carried affective and emotional weight and referenced shared cultural knowledge, producing what Wodak (2001) would describe as "discourses of belonging." This indicates that mixed captions concerns not only as linguistic possibilities but also as ideological resources that reinforce cultural solidarity and emotional juxtaposition with local audiences. Corpus observations also supported the difference in audience adaptation: English only captions tended to be shorter, minimalist, functional and stylistically uniform, while mixed captions revealed greater thematic variation, humour, and emotional expression. These conclusions correspond with Fairclough's (1989) view that language practices reproduce social hierarchies. The English only captions consider an ideology of digital elitism and pretentious, reachable primarily to audiences familiar with global internet language, although mixed captions exhibit comprehensive and cultural accessibility. This difference was further reinforced by modality patterns: English captions

used neutral or motivational declaratives (“feeling blessed,” “we move”), while Urdu-mixed captions employed stronger affective modality (“yaar bohat maza aya,” “dil se shukriya”), emphasising shared emotions and social closeness. Overall, the outcomes and results signal that English only captions represent upward adaptability, modernity, and global aspiration, while mixed captions incorporate cultural rootedness, originality, and emotional resonance. Both linguistic strategies carry ideological implications: English strengthens the discourse of global modernity, whereas Urdu reinforces local identity and cultural intimacy. Therefore, the amalgamation of corpus patterns and CDA interpretation confirms that TikTok caption language in Pakistan is not simply stylistic but deeply bind to social positioning, digital identity, and challenging ideological orientations shaped by globalization and local cultural values.

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