Semantic Shift in English Loanwords Used by Pakistani Urdu-Speaking Community on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

The use of English loanwords in Urdu communication has increased, particularly in digital discourse where the meanings of these words shift. The way loanwords are understood in Urdu discourse is influenced by social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and X (formerly known as Twitter), which offer a dynamic environment for linguistic change. Despite extensive research on code-switching and borrowing, limited studies specifically examine the semantic shifts of English loanwords in Urdu within online interactions. This study aims to examine how English loanwords used in informal Urdu communication on social media have changed semantically. It focuses on categorizing the types of semantic changes, identifying the changed meanings, and comparing them to their original meanings. A qualitative approach was used, analyzing 12 X posts and 12 videos from TikTok and YouTube. Data was collected from videos transcripts, captions and public posts to examine the contextual adaptation of those loanwords in Urdu discourse. Metaphorical extension, broadening, narrowing, pejoration, and elevation were observed as types of semantic shifts under Leonard Bloomfield's (1933) model of semantic change. The most common type was metaphorical extension which appeaard in four words. Broadening was the joint second with narrowing, each observed in three words. Semantic elevation and pejoration appeared in one word each. The findings show that digital communication accelerates semantic shifts in English loanwords in Urdu discourse. This study highlights the role of social media in reshaping borrowed words' meaning.

Keywords: Linguistic borrowing, Semantic change, Social media, Urdu-English code-mixing, Language contact

INTRODUCTION

English is a global language and is very much needed around the world for communication. It serves as a lingua franca, allowing people to communicate their thoughts and feelings across the globe. Along with German, French, Arabic, and many other languages, English is one of the most spoken languages. But the thought process and reasoning behind English are quite different from those of other languages. In colonization times, English was a tool for cultural transmission. Throughout colonization, the British enforced their language everywhere they went. The colonizers used English to integrate their culture. English was adopted into governmental offices in the Indian subcontinent during British control. Among Indians, one group in the Muslim community favored the language, while the other did not. Those who advocated for English were mostly the members of the British government who viewed the language as a diplomatic instrument between the empire and the local people. Thus, it was at that time that the English language came to be associated with prestige and supremacy. The idea that English was the language of authority and power was propagated. After partition, Pakistan declared English as its official language, and Pakistani writers began producing literature in English. Writing literature in English signified its acceptance as part of one's culture. As people read English literature, consumed media in English, and were educated in English at schools and universities, the language became deeply embedded in Pakistani culture and society.

On the other hand, Urdu is not only Pakistan's national language, but also spoken in other countries which include Bangladesh, India, Afghanistan and Nepal. Urdu is a mixture of Arabic and Persian and is structurally flexible. Now as English and Urdu entered in parallel existence in Pakistani community, English started affecting Urdu. This prompted common code-switching and code-mixing, wherein speakers use a combination of Urdu and English in dialogue with each other. Many Urdu speakers frequently incorporate English words and expressions into their speech.

According to the language contact theory, interactions between two or more languages existing in the same environment have influence on one another. Language contact, according to Sarah G. Thomason (2000), is the simultaneous usage of multiple languages in the same location. The fact that Urdu and English have taken terms from one other makes it clear. Borrowing is the act of taking words from another language, according to Mohaisen, A. G. (2017). One common type of borrowing is loanwords, where a word is taken from another language while retaining its original dictionary meaning. Another type is semantic borrowing, where a borrowed word's meaning is altered to fit the cultural and linguistic context of the receiving language. English terms are commonly borrowed by Urdu speakers, who sometimes modify them to fit their own conceptual and cultural frameworks and other times use them with their original meanings (a practice known as code-mixing). To fit a borrowed term with comparable ideas or concepts in the target language, its meaning must be expanded or contracted. Conceptual mapping assists Urdu speakers in altering the meaning or usage patterns of acquired English words by linking and associating them with already-used Urdu concepts. Due to the cultural and linguistic context, borrowed words may be used metaphorically, taking on new meanings or connections.

The researchers focus on how English loanwords have changed semantically in the Pakistani Urdu-speaking society, especially on social media. The meanings of many borrowed terms have changed, frequently taking the place of the original definitions in speakers' thoughts. Social media is a huge platform for communication that brings people together from both urban and rural areas. It offers the perfect context for examining the evolution of English loanwords in Urdu speech because of its extensive influence.

Research Questions

1. Which English loanwords in Urdu informal communication in Pakistani context have undergone semantic changes on social media platforms?
2. What is the difference between the original dictionary meaning and the meaning given by Pakistani Urdu speakers to these English loanwords?
3. How are English loanwords used with different meaning in Urdu communication on social media platforms in Pakistani society?

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research aim to:

1. Identify specific English loanwords in Urdu that exhibit semantic changes in Urdu informal communication on social media in Pakistani context.
2. Differentiate between the original dictionary meaning of English loanwords and the meaning given by Pakistani Urdu speakers to those words.
3. Analyze the contextual adaptation and use of English loanwords in Urdu communication on social media in Pakistani society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language contact, according to Thomason (2000), is the usage of multiple languages simultaneously in the same location, resulting in linguistic interchange. Words borrowing is frequently the initial point of contact in multilingual groups, she notes, followed by structural impacts like syntax and phonology. English vocabulary that are now often used in ordinary speech have been adopted and modified in Urdu because of interaction with English.

According to Pennycook (2007) and Canagarajah (2005), English has impacted local languages' grammatical structures and speech patterns in addition to lending them loanwords. Their research shows how code-mixing and borrowing occur in bilingual communities since English is frequently seen as a

prominent language. In Pakistan, the incorporation of English into Urdu is most evident in social interactions, media, and education, where English terms frequently acquire new meanings shaped by regional cultural settings.

Numerous studies have been conducted on the phenomena of code-switching and lexical borrowing in Urdu-English speech. Urdu speakers commonly incorporate English terms into their speech, resulting in a hybrid linguistic style, as Rahman (1996) and Rehmani (2009) describe. Their study highlights how borrowed terms change depending on local cultural interpretations rather than always maintaining their original meanings. This lends credence to Thomason's (2000) theory that borrowed words change semantically as they adapt to a new linguistic context.

A framework for comprehending how borrowed words change in meaning is offered by semantic shift theory. According to Riemer (2010), social, cultural, and historical factors all contribute to semantic shifts. He distinguishes between three primary categories of semantic shifts:

- When a word's meaning expands beyond its initial definition, it is said to be broadening.
- When a word's meaning grows more precise, it is said to be narrowing.
- A word undergoes a complete change when it acquires a meaning completely distinct from its original usage.

Leonard Bloomfield's (1933) model of semantic change provides an extensive framework for the analysis of change in words' meaning over time. Broadening is the process where a word's meaning adopts a broader concept; narrowing, where its meaning becomes more specific; pejoration, where a word develops a negative connotation; amelioration (semantic elevation), where a word gains a more positive meaning; and metaphor, where a word acquires a figurative meaning.

Few studies have explicitly looked at semantic alterations in social media conversation, even though there is a wealth of study on English-Urdu language interaction. Most earlier studies concentrated on formal language contexts, such professional communication and schooling. However, the semantic change of English loanwords in Urdu has accelerated due to internet platforms like as YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok. By examining how English terms are redefined in real-time social media interactions, the current study seeks to close this research gap and provide insights into the swift linguistic changes taking place in the Urdu-speaking community.

METHODOLOGY

This study analyzes the semantic changes of English loanwords in Urdu social media discourse using qualitative method. The central focus of this study is on English loanwords which are used by Pakistani people with different meanings on YouTube, X, and TikTok while communicating in Urdu. The population of this study was Communications on these three platforms between Urdu speakers. The English loanwords are used extensively in Urdu discourse with changed meaning on these social media platforms. Due to the time constraint, a sample of ten posts from X were taken with ten videos from YouTube and TikTok. Screenshots, video transcripts, and captions were all used in the data collecting process. The original and altered meanings were compared using the Cambridge Dictionary as a guide. Leonard Bloomfield's (1933) model of semantic change was used as a framework for the categorization and analysis of those semantically shifted words.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

As the first stage of the analysis, screenshots and videos from social media sites where these English loanwords were employed with meanings distinct from their original definitions were used to gather data. It was simpler to spot the trends of broadening, narrowing, and metaphorical alterations in these borrowed terms by examining the changed meanings (Kaniz et al., 2025) in their original social media contexts. The documented semantic modifications based on this data collection are shown in the following table.

#	English Loanword	Original Meaning	Altered Meaning in Urdu	Type of Semantic Shift

1	Over	Above/higher than; finished/completed	Showing off or exaggerated behavior	Pejoration
2	Pump	A machine that moves liquid/gas	Entire petrol station	Broadening
3	Cream	Thick liquid from milk; skin product	Whitening cream (without specifying 'whitening')	Narrowing
4	Cylinder	Geometric shape; gas container	Specifically refers to a gas cylinder	Narrowing
5	Fix	To repair or make stable	Forcefully include someone in a group	Metaphorical Shift
6	Set	To arrange or position something	Friendship/Building a connection	Metaphorical Shift
7	End	The final part of something	Outstanding/Exceptional	Amelioration
8	Level	Height; position on a scale	Standard/Caliber (high quality)	Amelioration
9	Timepass	Passing time	Having fun; casual leisure activities	Broadening
10	Battery	Power source for devices	Energy/Stamina of a person	Metaphorical extension
11	Fit	To be the right size or shape	Amazing/Good	Amelioration
12	Container	A large metal box used for transporting goods	A large metal box used for road blockage	Narrowing

The table below lists social media quotes analyzed in the study, featuring X posts and corresponding TikTok/YouTube videos. Account names are mentioned instead of direct links for privacy.

Borrowed Word	Quote from Twitter (Feature Account)	Source Account Name	Quote from Video (TikTok/YouTube)	Source Account Name
Over	*"Tum bohut over hojati ho."*	Hammad_Baluch	*"Tum bohut over hojati ho."*	@Rabiaali122
Pump	*"Ap me se kis kis ko petrol pump me petrol dalwaty hwe apne hukumrano pe gussa ata h aur mulk k halat pe afsoos hota h."*	THUNDERzeshan	*"Chalo petrol pump chalte hain."*	@zunairkamboh
Cream	*"Mujy hmaisha dm aty h cream k bary me k konsi use kre achy results k lye..."*	Drsanakhan2237	*"Mai ap logo ko aj best cream suggest krongi."*	@holisticare.pharmacy
Cylinder	*"Social Alert! Ap sab se meri request hai ghar me females ko ihtyati tadabeer bta de cylinder use krny k..."*	Kalsoom_Batool	*"Apko fiber k cylinder dekhaongy."*	@ahinformationtvvideos
Fix	*"Kabhi bhi kisi me fix hony ki koshish na Kiya kre. Self respect sabse pehle hai."*	_Majid_Ali	*"Wo hum me fix hony ki koshish krta tha."*	@kmaalkhana
Set	*"Agar ap opposite gender ko as a other dekhengy to apko hamahisha nervousness hogi*	AliHassanMirza9	*"Opposite gender SE dosti/set krny k tips."*	@alichoudaary226

	interaction k duran. Agar ap chahty apki setting hojai...”			
End	*“Pakistan k performance pe end hogya g.”*	nomi_ism	*“Aaj Quetta walo ne end Kar Diya.”*	@malak_burhan_kasi
Level	*“Level krdia Ali Zafar ne. I’m impressed.”*	furqaan_farooq	*“Sikandar ki takat ka level he aur hai.”*	@panthertyres
Timepass	*“Kuch log smjty ha k me phuppo wali hrkty krti ho lkin tension not me just timepass krti.”*	farahdurranii	*“Meri to abhi SE battery low hogyi.”*	@bilalani_08
Battery	*“Bhailog aj mre battery low hai to live ni aa skta.”*	Kamran_Ghulam	*“Meri to abhi SE battery low hogyi.”*	@hammad666
Fit	*“Yaarrrrrr Cristiano ki nye ghari bhut fit hai. Mre dream car h.”*	Ahmed_Naeem	*“Bohot fit movie thi.”*	@zainali
Container	*“Islamabad ka naam container city hona chaiye”*	Luqman_khan	*“Islambad k tamam rasty containers k zariye bnd kr dye gye hai”*	@ Aaj TV official

a) Quotes from social media: Literal Translation > Intended Translation

The following analysis is carried out using the above formula.

Container

"اسلام آباد کے تمام راستے کنٹینرز کے ذریعے بند کر دیے گئے ہیں۔"

“All roads in Islamabad have been blocked using containers.” > “All roads in Islamabad have been blocked with road barriers.”

In Urdu, the word “container” has become narrower (metonymy), now referring solely to road blockades rather than general storage containers. Pakistan’s political environment, where shipping containers are commonly utilized to block highways during rallies, security lockdowns, and state-imposed limitations, has influenced this change. This link has been strengthened by news outlets, social media, and public debate, making the “container” a well-known term for political road closures. Over time, this metonymic shift has consolidated, indicating how language changes in reaction to societal reality.

Over

"تم بہت اوور ہو جاتی ہو۔"

“You become very over.” > “You act too dramatic”

In Urdu social media discourse, the word “over” has become derogatory, moving from its original English meaning like “above” or “completed” to “overly expressive” on social media. As loanwords change in cultural settings, it now refers to spectacular, flashy, or attention-seeking behavior. This quote is taken from a social media influencer account where she has used it with a meaning which deviates from its dictionary meaning. The speakers have changed its meaning using conceptual making. They have given the word “over” a new meaning which could be because it is a prefix in the word “overconfident”, so they have given the meaning of overconfident to “over”. The example of “over” demonstrates how borrowed words become part of Urdu while gaining whole new meanings influenced by online interactions.

Pump

"چلو پیٹرول پمپ چلتے ہیں۔"

“ Let’s go to the petrol pump.” > “Let’s go to the petrol station.”

In Urdu, the term “pump” has become more extensive, referring to the complete petrol station rather than only the fuel-dispensing device as it originally means in English. When incorporated into another language, borrowed words can gain a broader meaning, as seen by this semantic expansion. The above quote shows how the word is used by an influencer with different meanings on social media. The change is most

noticeable in social media and spoken Urdu, where people use "pump" to refer to the entire idea of a petrol station rather than simply the mechanical mechanism.

Cream

<div dir="rtl">"میں آپ لوگوں کو آج بہترین کریم سجیسٹ کروں گی۔</div>

"I will suggest the best cream for you today." > "I will suggest the best whitening cream for you today."

The term "cream" has become more specific in Urdu social media discourse, referring only to whitening creams and no longer to other kinds of creams (such moisturizers, medications, or food-related creams). Due to the widespread production and marketing of whitening creams throughout Pakistan, the term "cream" has come to refer to skin-whitening products rather than medications, or food-related creams in general. Speakers avoid using the phrase "whitening" in casual discussions, particularly on social media, because the connotation is so strong that it doesn't need to be further defined as used by a doctor in the given quote. This illustrates how language use may be influenced by repeated exposure to certain product categories, resulting in a semantic narrowing where a more general word becomes associated with a particular product in a commercial and cultural context.

Cylinder

<div dir="rtl">"آپ کو فائبر کا سلنڈر دکھاؤں گا۔"</div>

"I will show you a fiber cylinder." > "I will show you a fiber gas cylinder."

In Urdu, the word "cylinder" has become more specific, referring only to gas cylinders and no longer to any cylindrical-shaped item. The community's extensive manufacturing and usage of gas cylinders, which have become the word's default association, is the cause of this change. Since many speakers are unfamiliar with other kinds of cylinders in physics, mechanics, or mathematics, a lack of technical knowledge also plays a role in this narrowing. The quote above shows how the word cylinder is used by a social media marketer. Without specification about the cylinder, he knew the audience would get it. As an example of how repeated exposure to a single item may gradually limit a word's apparent meaning, the word "cylinder" in common Urdu speech instead refers solely to gas storage containers.

Fix

<div dir="rtl">"وہ ہم میں فکس ہونے کی کوشش کرتا تھا۔"</div>

"He used to try to fix himself among us." > "He used to try to forcefully adjust himself in our group."

In Urdu social media discourse, the word "fix" has taken on a metaphorical meaning that alludes to putting oneself into a group or social environment rather than fixing or stabilising anything. The social structure of Pakistan, where group membership is mostly seen as necessary for social validation and approval, is what is causing this change. The changed meaning represents circumstances in which an individual attempts to fit in with a group even when they are not natively welcomed.

Set

<div dir="rtl">"اوپوزٹ جینڈر سے دوستی/سیٹ کرنے کے ٹپس"</div>

"Tips for making friends/setting up with the opposite gender." > "Tips for building a connection with the opposite gender."

The word "set" has changed its meaning since it now means creating a link or relationship, especially with someone of the opposite gender. This change reflects Pakistan's shifting social dynamics. Boy-girl friendships are still rare in many parts of Pakistani culture due to which terminology like "set" are used by the new generation to characterize the process of forming these kinds of relationships. In internet interactions, the phrase is more socially acceptable since it offers a less direct way to allude to friendships between men and women. This change has been sped up by social media sites like TikTok, where influencers use relevant and casual language as in the given quote to break down social boundaries in communication.

End

<div dir="rtl">"آج کوئٹہ والوں نے اینڈ کر دیا۔"</div>

"Today, the people of Quetta did the end." > "Today, the people of Quetta performed exceptionally."

The term "end" has undergone amelioration, signifying excellence or an exceptional accomplishment instead of its original meaning of completion or ending point. The Urdu phrase (had kar dia) is the source of this change, where "حد" (meaning "limit" or "last point") denotes achieving the utmost degree. In a similar vein, Urdu speakers use "end" to characterize a performance that is so exceptional that nothing can surpass it. So, "end kar diya" is a casual yet effective approach to celebrate extraordinary achievement.

Level

"سکندر کی طاقت کا لیول ہی اور ہے۔"

"Sikandar's strength has a different level." > "Sikandar's strength is of a higher/exclusive standard."

From its dictionary meaning of a position on a scale to now interpreting as better or unrivalled quality, the term "level" has seen semantic elevation. The word "level" is used in this advertising by Pakistani cricket player Babar Azam to highlight the brand's exceptional quality and emphasize that it is superior to all its competitors. As a result of its widespread usage in marketing, social media, and ads, Urdu speakers today now use the word "level" to refer to superiority, style, or personal perfection. These days, people utilize expressions like "Mera level alag hai" meaning "I am superior" to convey confidence and a high standard for themselves. The social media platforms have made "level" a commonly accepted indicator of differentiation and status in Urdu communication.

Timepass

"کچھ بھی نہیں، بس ٹائم پاس کر رہا ہوں۔"

"Nothing at all, just passing time." > "Nothing at all, just having fun."

Semantic expansion has changed the term "timepass" meaning from an activity done only to pass the time to fun and enjoyment. The word "timepass" originally meant "to occupy oneself without purpose" in English, but in Pakistani Urdu, it now means "to have fun, relax, or enjoy free time." This change is supported by social and conversational usage, when speakers use "timepass" more casually to refer to light-hearted activities, entertainment, or socializing. An Islamic scholar's usage of this term in the above quote further clarifies how language changes to fit cultural circumstances, since even a borrowed word may eventually acquire a more engaging and positive meaning.

Battery

"میری تو ابھی سے بیٹری لو ہوگئی۔"

"My battery is already low." > "I am already feeling exhausted."

The term "battery" is undergone through the process of amelioration, meaning that it now describes a person's energy levels rather than just an electrical power source. The increasing use of cell phones and other technological electric devices, which has made "battery low" a common word in everyday speech, is probably the cause of this change. The phrase "Meri battery low hogayi" is use to humorously say "I am exhausted", since Urdu speakers have begun to associate human depletion with a depleted battery over time. This is a result of technical developments that demonstrate their impact on linguistic evolution, as social media reinforces and disseminates these words in online communications.

Fit

"بہت فٹ مووی تھی۔"

"It was a very fit movie." > "It was a great/excellent movie."

The term "fit" has experienced semantic elevation, so it now means great quality, excellence, or impressiveness rather than physical compatibility or appropriateness. Using the word "fit" to describe a film, the model in this TikTok commercial suggests that it was outstanding, expertly made, or amusing. This change is a result of Pakistani youth language with rise of social media, where the word "fit" is now frequently used to commend exceptional performance. The phrase "fit" has become commonly used to describe anything noteworthy, from fashion to movies to personal accomplishments.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated semantic changes in English loanwords within the Pakistani Urdu-speaking community with an emphasis on their new meanings in social media discourse. The examination of tweets and video clips showed that borrowed terms are influenced by digital, social, and cultural factors rather

than always maintaining their dictionary definitions. Originally used to represent a fuel-dispensing mechanism, the word "pump" now refers to an entire petrol station, while the word "battery" has expanded to symbolically depict the energy levels of people because of the excessive use of electric devices. Similar metaphorical changes have been made to terminology like "set" and "fix" to denote social interactions and coerced group involvement. Metaphorical extension was the most common kind of semantic shift that was seen, followed by widening and narrowing. Semantic elevation and derogation were also noted, but they were less frequent. This variant demonstrates how social media speeds up linguistic changes by introducing new linguistic norms through influencer-driven discourse and viral trends. Furthermore, political settings have impacted changes in meaning. For example, the term "container" no longer refers to storage facilities but rather to road blockades. These results show that semantic shift in borrowed words follows a pattern of linguistic change that is influenced by functional need, cultural significance, and repeated exposure. Future research might go further by performing a diachronic analysis across various media platforms to follow the long-term trajectory of English loanwords in Urdu discourse, even if this study offers insightful information on the real-time linguistic transformation taking place in Urdu digital spaces.

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