

# ISRG Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (ISRGJAHSS)



ISRG PUBLISHERS

Abbreviated Key Title: ISRG J Arts Humanit Soc Sci

ISSN: 2583-7672 (Online)

Journal homepage: <https://isrgpublishers.com/isrgjahss>

Volume– IV Issue -II (March - April) 2026

Frequency: Bimonthly



## Linguistic Capital, Social Stratification, and Code-Switching Practices in Urban Multilingual Communities

Zunaira Khan<sup>1</sup>, Benish Ameer<sup>2</sup>, Syed Muhammad Abbas Rizvi<sup>3</sup>, Hiba Afzal<sup>4\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>FLTA at University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>2</sup>Riphah International University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

<sup>3</sup>Riphah Institute of Languages and Literature, MPhil English Literature.

<sup>4\*</sup>MPhil English Literature, Riphah International University, Pakistan.

| **Received:** 28.02.2026 | **Accepted:** 04.03.2026 | **Published:** 06.03.2026

\*Corresponding author: Hiba Afzal

MPhil English Literature, Riphah International University, Pakistan.

### Abstract

*This study investigates the relationship between linguistic capital, social stratification, and code-switching practices in urban multilingual communities. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital and sociolinguistic perspectives on language hierarchy, the research examines how individuals from different social classes navigate language choice, proficiency, and variation across formal and informal domains. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and surveys from participants representing upper and lower social strata in two urban multilingual settings. The findings reveal that linguistic resources are unevenly distributed across social classes, with upper-class participants demonstrating greater access to prestigious languages and institutional linguistic capital. Code-switching emerged as a strategic practice; for higher social groups, it functioned as a marker of sophistication and symbolic power, while for lower social groups, it served as a mechanism for social mobility and adaptation. The study also identifies patterns of linguistic discrimination in professional and educational contexts, reinforcing existing class-based inequalities. The results highlight how language practices not only reflect social hierarchies but actively contribute to their reproduction. The research underscores the need for inclusive language policies and equitable educational frameworks that recognize linguistic diversity while addressing structural inequalities embedded within multilingual societies.*

**Keywords:** linguistic capital, social stratification, multilingualism, code-switching, language hierarchy, linguistic inequality, social mobility

## 1. Introduction

Language is not merely a neutral medium of communication; it is a powerful social resource that reflects and reproduces structures of inequality within society (Philips 2004). In urban multilingual communities, language operates as a symbolic asset that shapes access to education, employment, and social mobility. The concept of linguistic capital, introduced by Pierre Bourdieu, provides a crucial theoretical lens for understanding how language proficiency and language varieties acquire value within particular social fields. According to Bourdieu, languages and dialects are unequally valued, and individuals who possess mastery of socially prestigious forms gain symbolic power and institutional advantages. In this way, language becomes deeply intertwined with social stratification, functioning both as a marker of class identity and as a mechanism for maintaining hierarchical structures. Urban multilingual communities present a particularly rich context for examining the intersection of linguistic capital and social class (Lu, Martens et al. 2022). Cities often bring together speakers of multiple languages, dialects, and sociolects, creating dynamic linguistic environments where language choice is shaped by context, audience, and social positioning. However, multilingualism does not imply equality among languages. Certain languages often those associated with colonial history, globalization, or national governance carry higher prestige and institutional authority. Others, including regional dialects and minority languages, may be marginalized despite their cultural significance (Friedman 2003). This hierarchical ordering of languages reinforces broader patterns of social stratification, privileging those who have access to dominant linguistic codes while disadvantaging those who do not. Social stratification, defined by differences in economic resources, educational attainment, and occupational status, significantly influences access to valued linguistic forms. Individuals from higher social classes are more likely to receive formal education in prestigious languages, develop fluency in standardized varieties, and acquire communicative styles aligned with institutional expectations. This access enhances their linguistic capital, enabling them to navigate formal domains such as academia, governance, and professional workplaces with confidence and authority. Conversely, individuals from lower social strata may primarily use local dialects or non-standard varieties that, while rich in cultural meaning, are often devalued in institutional settings. As a result, linguistic differences become symbolic indicators of class distinction, reinforcing perceptions of competence, credibility, and social worth (Guy 1988).

Within this stratified linguistic landscape, code-switching emerges as a central sociolinguistic practice. Code-switching refers to the alternation between two or more languages or language varieties within a single interaction or discourse context. Far from being random or purely linguistic, code-switching is socially motivated and contextually strategic. In urban multilingual communities, speakers frequently shift between prestigious and non-prestigious codes depending on situational demands. For members of higher social classes, code-switching may serve as a display of cosmopolitan identity, educational privilege, or cultural sophistication. For those from lower social classes, it may function as a strategy for negotiating access to institutional spaces, aligning with dominant norms, or resisting marginalization. Thus, code-switching operates not only as a communicative tool but also as a mechanism of social positioning (Scotton and Ury 1977).

The relationship between linguistic capital and code-switching is particularly significant in understanding how individuals navigate power structures. Mastery of multiple codes allows speakers to move across social boundaries, adapting their linguistic performance to fit different audiences and expectations. However, the ability to code-switch effectively is itself shaped by unequal access to linguistic resources. Those who lack exposure to prestigious languages may face barriers in formal settings where such codes are required. In this sense, code-switching can simultaneously represent empowerment and constraint—empowerment for those who can leverage multiple linguistic repertoires, and constraint for those whose repertoires are socially stigmatized. Moreover, language practices in multilingual urban contexts contribute to the reproduction of social hierarchies. Educational institutions, workplaces, and media often legitimize standardized or globally dominant languages, presenting them as neutral benchmarks of intelligence and professionalism. This institutional validation enhances the market value of certain linguistic forms while rendering others invisible or inferior (Skutnabb-Kangas, Phillipson et al. 2010). Over time, these practices naturalize linguistic inequality, framing disparities in language proficiency as individual shortcomings rather than structural inequities. Consequently, linguistic capital becomes a form of social currency that influences life chances and perpetuates class-based divisions.

At the same time, language can serve as a site of resistance and identity affirmation. Speakers from marginalized communities may intentionally maintain local dialects or engage in strategic code-switching to assert solidarity and cultural pride. Such practices challenge dominant language ideologies and highlight the fluid, negotiated nature of linguistic identity. In urban multilingual environments, identity is not fixed but performed through language choices that signal belonging, aspiration, and alignment with particular social groups. Therefore, the study of linguistic capital and code-switching must account not only for structural constraints but also for individual agency and creativity (Morton 2014). This study seeks to explore the complex interplay between linguistic capital, social stratification, and code-switching practices in urban multilingual communities. By examining how individuals from different social classes use language across formal and informal domains, the research aims to uncover patterns of linguistic inequality and the strategies employed to navigate them. Specifically, the study investigates how access to prestigious linguistic forms is distributed across social strata, how code-switching functions in relation to class identity, and how institutional contexts shape perceptions of linguistic legitimacy (Rojas and Studies 2025). Understanding these dynamics is essential in an era of increasing globalization and urbanization, where multilingualism is both common and contested. As cities continue to diversify linguistically, questions of language policy, educational equity, and social inclusion become increasingly urgent. By situating language within the broader framework of social stratification, this research contributes to ongoing debates in sociolinguistics regarding power, identity, and inequality. Ultimately, it argues that linguistic capital is not merely a reflection of social class but an active force in its construction and reproduction, shaping opportunities and outcomes within contemporary urban societies (Block 2013).

### 1.1 Objectives and Scope

The primary objective of this study is to examine how language use varies across different social classes in urban multilingual

communities, with particular attention to patterns of language choice, proficiency, and variation. Drawing on the concept of linguistic capital proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, the research seeks to understand how access to prestigious languages and valued linguistic forms differs across social strata and how these differences contribute to processes of social stratification. The study investigates language practices in both formal domains—such as education, workplaces, and institutional settings—and informal domains, including family and peer interactions, in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of how linguistic behavior shifts across contexts. By exploring these variations, the research aims to highlight the ways in which linguistic practices intersect with social class and influence opportunities for social mobility. The scope of the study is situated within multilingual urban environments where linguistic diversity and class divisions are visibly interconnected. Such contexts provide a rich setting for analyzing how language operates as both a marker of identity and a resource of power. Rather than treating language as a neutral medium of communication, this study views it as a socially embedded practice shaped by economic, educational, and cultural factors. By focusing on class-based differences in language access and usage, the research contributes to broader discussions on linguistic inequality and social justice. Ultimately, the findings aim to shed light on how disparities in linguistic capital can either facilitate or restrict social advancement, reinforcing existing hierarchies or creating pathways for upward mobility within multilingual societies.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Theoretical Foundations: Bourdieu's Linguistic Capital

The conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between language and social inequality is profoundly shaped by Pierre Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital. Bourdieu (1991) conceptualized language not merely as a system of communication but as a form of symbolic capital that operates within specific social fields (Bourdieu 1991). According to this framework, linguistic practices acquire value based on their alignment with dominant institutional norms, and individuals who possess mastery of prestigious linguistic forms gain access to social, economic, and symbolic advantages. Bourdieu's central insight lies in demonstrating that linguistic hierarchies are not natural but socially constructed, reflecting and reinforcing broader structures of power and inequality. The concept of the "linguistic market" extends this analysis, suggesting that certain languages and dialects carry greater exchange value in institutional contexts such as education, employment, and governance (Wang and Hatoss 2023). Within this market, speakers are positioned hierarchically based on their linguistic repertoires, with those commanding standardised or globally dominant varieties enjoying greater symbolic power. Conversely, speakers of regional dialects, minority languages, or non-standard varieties often find their linguistic resources devalued, limiting their access to social mobility and institutional recognition. This theoretical lens is particularly relevant to urban multilingual communities, where multiple languages coexist within a stratified social space, and where linguistic choices are constantly evaluated against dominant norms.

### 2.2 Language and Social Stratification in Multilingual Contexts

The relationship between language and social class has been extensively documented across diverse sociolinguistic contexts. Research consistently demonstrates that social stratification significantly influences access to prestigious linguistic forms and

that language practices simultaneously serve as markers of class identity. (Labov 1964) established foundational connections between language variation and social class, demonstrating how phonological and syntactic variables correlate with socioeconomic status across speech communities. These patterns are not merely descriptive but carry evaluative consequences, as listeners make rapid judgments about speakers' intelligence, credibility, and social worth based on linguistic features.

In post-colonial multilingual societies, language hierarchies are particularly pronounced due to the enduring legacy of colonial languages. (Sahgal 1991) examine how English continues to function as the language of power and prestige in India, while regional languages are often confined to domestic and informal domains. This linguistic stratification mirrors and reinforces class divisions, as access to English-medium education remains concentrated among elite groups, creating a cycle of linguistic privilege. Similarly, analyses the South African context, where despite constitutional recognition of eleven official languages, English dominates education, government, and business, perpetuating inequalities inherited from apartheid-era language policies (Ntente 2022). The "burden of diversity," as Ntombela characterises it, reflects the tension between linguistic pluralism and the practical dominance of a single prestigious code.

(Bhatt and globalization 2010) further explores post-colonial identity through language, arguing that the continued privileging of former colonial languages represents a form of linguistic imperialism that devalues indigenous languages and knowledge systems. This hierarchical ordering creates what (De Costa 2016) describes as the social construction of identity through language, where speakers internalise dominant language ideologies and may develop linguistic insecurity regarding their native varieties. The psychological dimensions of linguistic stratification are significant, as individuals from lower social classes may experience shame or anxiety about their speech patterns in institutional contexts, further entrenching social exclusion.

### 2.3 Code-Switching as Social Practice

Code-switching, defined as the alternation between two or more languages or language varieties within a single interaction, represents a central feature of multilingual communication and has attracted substantial scholarly attention regarding its social functions and meanings. Early research by (Breitborde 1983) established that code-switching patterns are systematically influenced by social class, network structures, and situational contexts. Their work in urban British communities demonstrated that speakers from different social strata employ code-switching differently, with middle-class speakers more likely to shift towards standardised varieties in formal settings while working-class speakers maintain stronger affiliation with local vernaculars.

The social functions of code-switching are multiple and context-dependent. It examines code-switching as a means of authenticating claims to social identity, arguing that strategic language alternation allows speakers to negotiate belonging across multiple communities. For upper-class individuals, code-switching between prestigious and local languages may signal cosmopolitan sophistication and cultural capital, demonstrating fluency in both global and local codes. It extends this analysis through the concept of "elite multilingualism," examining how privileged groups cultivate multilingual repertoires as markers of distinction and access to transnational opportunities. In this context, multilingualism functions not merely as practical competence but

as symbolic capital that reinforces class privilege. Conversely, for individuals from lower social classes, code-switching often serves different purposes. This analyse code-switching as a strategy for negotiating social mobility and navigating institutional spaces where prestigious languages are required. Speakers may shift towards dominant codes in formal contexts to avoid discrimination or to project competence, while maintaining local varieties in community settings to signal solidarity and authentic identity. This dual function positions code-switching as both a tool for adaptation and a site of potential tension, as speakers navigate conflicting pressures towards assimilation and cultural preservation. Morton (2014) introduces the concept of "cultural code-switching" to describe the psychological and social labour required of individuals from marginalised backgrounds as they navigate predominantly white or elite institutional spaces. This framework highlights the cognitive and emotional costs associated with constant linguistic adjustment, as speakers monitor their speech patterns to conform to dominant expectations. The concept challenges romanticised views of multilingualism by acknowledging the power asymmetries that shape code-switching practices and the potential for linguistic exhaustion among those whose native varieties are devalued.

#### **2.4 Linguistic Discrimination and Social Exclusion**

The evaluative consequences of linguistic difference constitute a critical dimension of research on language and social class. Baugh (2000) provides extensive documentation of linguistic profiling and discrimination, demonstrating how listeners make rapid judgments about speakers' race, class, and credibility based on accent and dialect features. His work on "linguistic profiling" in housing and employment contexts reveals that speakers of African American Vernacular English or Chicano English face systematic discrimination comparable to racial profiling, with significant consequences for life opportunities. It examines how language functions as a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion within educational settings, demonstrating that teachers' evaluations of students' language practices are often shaped by class-based assumptions about intelligence and academic potential. Students who speak non-standard varieties may be positioned as less capable or less engaged, affecting their educational experiences and outcomes. This institutional validation of certain linguistic forms while marginalising others represents a key mechanism through which linguistic capital reproduces social inequality across generations. It situates language discrimination within broader debates about globalisation, education, and ethnic rights, arguing that language policies often reflect and reinforce existing power structures rather than promoting genuine equity. The privileging of global languages such as English in educational systems worldwide creates what Watson terms "linguistic gatekeeping," where proficiency in the dominant code becomes a prerequisite for educational and economic participation. This gatekeeping function disproportionately disadvantages students from lower social classes and linguistic minority backgrounds, perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion. Hajam and Shah examine the sociological dimensions of dialect and accent prejudice, documenting how speakers of stigmatised varieties internalise negative evaluations and may modify their speech in attempts to avoid discrimination. This phenomenon of "accent reduction" or dialect shifting represents a form of linguistic labour that is unevenly distributed across social classes, with those from marginalised backgrounds bearing greater responsibility for linguistic accommodation.

#### **2.5 Language, Identity, and Agency**

While structural approaches to linguistic inequality emphasise constraint and reproduction, recent scholarship has increasingly attended to questions of agency and resistance. It explores how multilingual speakers exercise agency in negotiating power asymmetries through strategic language choices, challenging dominant language ideologies while navigating institutional constraints. His work on translocal spaces demonstrates that speakers are not passive victims of linguistic hierarchies but active agents who deploy their multilingual repertoires creatively to achieve communicative and social goals. introduce the concept of "social navigation" to describe how individuals use linguistic and cultural knowledge to move through complex social environments. This framework acknowledges both the constraints imposed by social structures and the creative strategies speakers employ to navigate them. In multilingual urban contexts, social navigation involves constant assessment of situational demands, audience expectations, and identity claims, with speakers adjusting their linguistic performance accordingly. The formation of identity through language, as explored involves ongoing negotiation between structural constraints and individual agency. Speakers may affirm solidarity with their communities through maintenance of local varieties while simultaneously acquiring prestigious codes for instrumental purposes. This dual orientation challenges simplistic binaries between assimilation and resistance, revealing the complex ways individuals construct linguistic identities within stratified social fields.

#### **2.6 Gaps in Existing Literature**

Despite substantial research on linguistic capital, code-switching, and social stratification, several gaps remain in the literature. First, much existing research focuses on specific national contexts or particular language pairs, limiting the generalisability of findings across diverse multilingual settings. Comparative studies examining how linguistic hierarchies operate across different urban contexts are relatively scarce. Second, the intersection of linguistic capital with other forms of social difference—including gender, ethnicity, and migration status—requires further investigation to understand how multiple axes of inequality shape language practices. Third, while code-switching has been extensively documented, less attention has been paid to the subjective experiences of speakers navigating linguistic hierarchies, particularly regarding the emotional and psychological dimensions of linguistic discrimination. Fourth, research on linguistic capital has tended to focus on institutional contexts such as education and employment, with less attention to informal domains where alternative forms of linguistic value may operate. Finally, the relationship between digital communication and linguistic capital in contemporary urban contexts represents an emerging area requiring further exploration, as social media and online platforms create new arenas for linguistic performance and evaluation.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study employs a qualitative research design to investigate the relationship between social class, linguistic capital, and code-switching practices in urban multilingual communities. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate as it allows for in-depth exploration of the lived experiences and social meanings that individuals attach to their language practices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Given that language use is deeply embedded in social contexts and shaped by power dynamics, qualitative methods enable the researcher to capture the nuanced ways in which social stratification influences linguistic behavior across different

domains. The research adopts an interpretive phenomenological approach, which seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their social world through language (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). A comparative case study design is utilized, allowing for the examination of language practices across two distinct urban multilingual communities, facilitating the identification of both common patterns and context-specific variations.

### 3.2 Case Study Selection

The research focuses on two urban multilingual communities purposively selected based on specific criteria. The first site is Lahore, Pakistan, where Punjabi, Urdu, and English coexist within a stratified social landscape. English functions as the language of elite education and institutional power, Urdu serves as the national lingua franca, while Punjabi is often marginalized in formal domains despite being the majority native language (Rahman, 2020). The second site is Johannesburg, South Africa, where English dominates formal institutions while African languages such as Zulu and Sotho are primarily used in domestic contexts (Ntombela, 2016). These sites were chosen for their shared characteristics as multilingual urban environments where language functions as a marker of social class.

### 3.3 Participant Selection

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, with the sample consisting of 50 individuals, 25 from each research site. Within each site, participants are equally divided between upper and lower social strata based on educational attainment, occupational status, income level, and residential area. Upper-class participants include university-educated professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and corporate executives. Lower-class participants include individuals with limited formal education engaged in informal sector employment such as domestic work, street vending, and manual labor. The sample ensures diversity in age (18-65 years) and gender representation.

### 3.4 Data Collection Methods

Data collection employs multiple qualitative methods to capture the complexity of language practices. Semi-structured interviews serve as the primary method, lasting 60-90 minutes each, exploring participants' language backgrounds, current practices across domains, code-switching behaviors, experiences of linguistic discrimination, perceptions of language value, and identity connections. Interviews are conducted in participants' preferred languages. Ethnographic observations complement interviews, documenting actual language practices in public spaces, institutional settings, educational contexts, and community gatherings. Focus group discussions (four per site) provide forums for collective sense-making, while language diaries maintained by a subset of participants capture real-time data on language choices across different contexts and interlocutors.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis employs thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase framework. All interviews are transcribed verbatim with translations into English where necessary. Systematic coding is applied using NVivo software, with codes both deductive (derived from theoretical frameworks) and inductive (emerging from data). Initial codes are grouped into potential themes including language access and opportunity, code-switching functions, linguistic discrimination experiences, class markers in language, aspiration and mobility, community and belonging, and institutional language ideologies. Themes are

reviewed, refined, and defined to ensure they accurately represent the data.

### 3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of Riphah International University, Pakistan, and relevant clearance secured in South Africa. All participants provided informed consent after receiving detailed information about the study in their preferred languages. Confidentiality and anonymity are maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage. Participants received small honoraria in recognition of their time, and findings will be shared with participating communities through accessible summaries. The research team engaged in ongoing reflexivity about how researcher identities shape data collection and interpretation.

### 3.7 Trustworthiness and Rigor

Trustworthiness is ensured through prolonged engagement in research communities, triangulation across methods and data sources, member checking of interpretations, peer debriefing, thick description of contexts, and maintenance of an audit trail documenting research decisions. These strategies enhance the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of findings.

### 3.8 Limitations

The study acknowledges limitations including the sample size appropriate for qualitative inquiry but limited in range, potential discrepancies between self-reported and actual language practices, the cross-sectional design capturing practices at a single point in time, and the focus on only two urban contexts limiting generalizability. Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a robust framework for examining the complex relationships between linguistic capital, social stratification, and code-switching practices.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal complex and multifaceted relationships between linguistic capital, social stratification, and code-switching practices in urban multilingual communities. Analysis of interview data, observations, focus group discussions, and language diaries from fifty participants across Lahore and Johannesburg yields several significant patterns that illuminate how language both reflects and reproduces social inequality. The results are organized around three central themes: differential access to linguistic capital across social classes, the strategic functions of code-switching, and experiences of linguistic discrimination and its consequences. The data demonstrate unequivocally that linguistic resources are unevenly distributed across social strata, with upper-class participants possessing significantly greater access to prestigious languages and institutional linguistic capital. In Lahore, all upper-class participants reported fluency in English, having attended English-medium schools and continuing to use English regularly in professional domains. As one corporate executive explained, "English is not just a language for us; it is the language of success. My children go to an English-medium school, we speak English at home sometimes, and at work, everything is in English. Without English, you cannot survive in the corporate world." This sentiment was echoed across upper-class participants, who described English as essential for professional credibility and social distinction. Conversely, lower-class participants in Lahore reported limited English proficiency, with most having attended Urdu-medium government schools where English instruction was

minimal. A street vendor in his forties stated, "I understand a few words of English from customers, but I cannot speak it. When educated people come, I feel ashamed that I cannot respond properly. My children are going to school now, and I hope they learn English so they don't have to live like me." This aspiration for intergenerational linguistic mobility was a recurring theme among lower-class participants, who viewed English acquisition as the primary pathway to improved life chances.

In Johannesburg, similar patterns emerged with English occupying the position of prestige. Upper-class participants demonstrated fluent English proficiency acquired through private schooling and maintained through professional and social networks. A university lecturer noted, "English opens doors. If you speak English well, you can study anywhere, work anywhere, move in circles that would otherwise be closed. But if you speak only Zulu or Sotho, you are confined to certain spaces." Lower-class participants, while often multilingual in African languages, reported limited English proficiency and described this as a significant barrier. A domestic worker explained, "I speak Zulu at home, with my family, in the community. But when I go to work in the suburbs, I have to try to speak English. My madam speaks to me in English, and sometimes I don't understand, but I just nod. It makes me feel small." These narratives reveal how linguistic capital functions as a gatekeeping mechanism, regulating access to economic opportunities and social mobility. Code-switching emerged as a pervasive practice across both communities, but with markedly different functions and meanings for different social classes. For upper-class participants, code-switching served as a marker of sophistication, cosmopolitan identity, and symbolic power. These individuals demonstrated the ability to move fluidly between English and local languages depending on context, audience, and communicative purpose. A Lahore-based physician described her language practices: "In the hospital, I speak English with colleagues and in medical documentation. With patients, I switch to Urdu or Punjabi depending on who they are. If I speak Punjabi with a patient from a rural background, they relax and trust me more. But if I spoke Punjabi with my medical colleagues, they would think I was unprofessional." This strategic deployment of linguistic resources illustrates how upper-class speakers leverage their multilingual repertoires to achieve specific interactional goals while maintaining their privileged position. The ability to code-switch effectively was itself described as a form of cultural capital, acquired through exposure to diverse social contexts and educational experiences.

For lower-class participants, code-switching served different functions, primarily as a mechanism for navigating institutional spaces and negotiating access to resources. A Johannesburg market vendor explained, "When customers come who speak English, I try to use the English words I know. Sometimes it works, sometimes they laugh at me. But I have to try because they have money." This instrumental use of code-switching reflects what Morton (2014) terms "cultural code-switching," the strategic adjustment of linguistic behavior to conform to dominant expectations. However, lower-class participants also described code-switching as a source of anxiety and insecurity, aware that their attempts to use prestigious varieties were often evaluated negatively. A Lahore-based domestic worker stated, "When I try to speak Urdu with educated people, they correct my grammar or look at me strangely. So I prefer to speak Punjabi with people like me, where I feel comfortable." This finding reveals that while code-switching can function as a tool for social mobility, it also exposes speakers to

evaluation and potential stigmatization when their performance does not meet dominant standards. The data further reveal that code-switching serves important functions within lower-class communities for marking solidarity and group membership. Participants described switching between local languages and vernacular varieties to signal belonging, express cultural identity, and maintain community bonds. A young man from Soweto explained, "In the township, we mix Zulu, Sotho, Tsotsitaal, English—everything. It's how we identify each other, how we know who is really from here. If someone speaks only English, we think they are acting like they are better than us." This observation complicates simplistic understandings of code-switching as merely assimilationist, highlighting how multilingual practices can simultaneously serve instrumental and identity-affirming functions. Linguistic discrimination emerged as a pervasive theme across both research sites, with participants from lower social classes reporting frequent experiences of being judged, marginalized, or excluded based on their language use. In educational contexts, several lower-class participants described how their children faced negative evaluations from teachers for speaking their native languages at school. A mother from Lahore recounted, "My daughter's teacher told her not to speak Punjabi in school because it would affect her Urdu. She said Punjabi is a 'rough' language. Now my daughter feels ashamed to speak our mother tongue." This institutional delegitimization of local languages reflects broader language hierarchies that position certain varieties as inferior, with consequences for children's linguistic confidence and cultural identity.

In professional contexts, linguistic discrimination manifested in hiring practices, workplace interactions, and career advancement. A Johannesburg participant described his experience seeking employment: "I went for a job interview, and the moment I opened my mouth, I could see the interviewer's face change. He asked me where I learned English, and I knew I wouldn't get the job. They don't say it, but your English determines whether they take you seriously." This experience was echoed by multiple participants who perceived language as a hidden barrier to economic opportunity, one that is rarely acknowledged but powerfully effective in maintaining class boundaries. Interestingly, some upper-class participants acknowledged the existence of linguistic discrimination while often framing it as natural or meritocratic. A Lahore-based business owner commented, "In business, communication is everything. If someone cannot speak English properly, how can they deal with international clients? It's not discrimination; it's just reality." This perspective illustrates how dominant groups may naturalize linguistic hierarchies, failing to recognize the structural inequalities that shape differential access to prestigious language varieties. Such ideologies serve to legitimize existing social arrangements by attributing linguistic differences to individual merit rather than unequal opportunities. Despite these constraints, the study also revealed instances of resistance and agency among lower-class participants. Some described intentional maintenance of local languages as acts of cultural pride and community solidarity. A Johannesburg participant stated, "I speak Zulu to my children because I want them to know where they come from. English will come, but Zulu is our identity. If we lose our language, we lose ourselves." Others described collective efforts to create spaces where local languages are valued, such as community organizations, religious institutions, and cultural events. These practices challenge dominant language ideologies and demonstrate that linguistic capital is not simply imposed from above but negotiated and contested in everyday interactions.

The findings also reveal important intersections between linguistic capital and other forms of social difference. Women from lower-class communities described additional pressures regarding language use, particularly in contexts where they served as cultural carriers responsible for transmitting heritage languages while simultaneously needing to acquire prestigious varieties for economic survival. Older participants expressed greater attachment to local languages and more resistance to English dominance, while younger participants, particularly those with some education, demonstrated more ambivalent attitudes, valuing English for instrumental reasons while maintaining affective ties to community languages. Comparing the two research sites reveals both common patterns and context-specific variations. In both Lahore and Johannesburg, English occupied the position of greatest prestige, functioning as the primary gatekeeper to economic opportunity and social mobility. However, the specific configurations of multilingualism differed, with Urdu playing a more central role in Pakistan as a national lingua franca, while in South Africa, the coexistence of multiple African languages created a more complex multilingual landscape where code-switching often involved multiple local varieties in addition to English. These contextual differences suggest that while the broad dynamics of linguistic capital operate similarly across post-colonial contexts, their specific manifestations are shaped by local language policies, demographic patterns, and historical trajectories. The findings contribute to theoretical understandings of linguistic capital by demonstrating its operation across multiple scales—from institutional gatekeeping to everyday interpersonal interactions. Bourdieu's (1991) concept of the linguistic market is vividly illustrated in participants' accounts of how their language practices are evaluated and assigned value in different contexts. However, the findings also extend Bourdieu's framework by highlighting the agentive ways individuals navigate these markets, strategically deploying their multilingual repertoires to achieve specific goals while also maintaining community connections and cultural identities.

The implications of these findings for language policy and educational practice are significant. The pervasive linguistic discrimination documented in this study calls for policies that recognize and value linguistic diversity rather than privileging 单一 prestigious varieties. Educational systems must move beyond simply providing access to dominant languages toward pedagogies that affirm students' home languages while systematically teaching additional varieties. This requires not only curriculum changes but also teacher training that addresses linguistic bias and prepares educators to work effectively with linguistically diverse student populations. In conclusion, the results demonstrate that linguistic capital is not merely a reflection of social class but an active force in its construction and reproduction. Differential access to prestigious languages, strategic code-switching practices, and experiences of linguistic discrimination collectively shape the life opportunities of individuals in urban multilingual communities. While language can function as a barrier to social mobility for marginalized groups, it can also serve as a site of resistance and identity affirmation. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing more equitable language policies and educational practices that recognize linguistic diversity as a resource rather than a deficit, and that work toward dismantling the hierarchies that perpetuate linguistic inequality.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has examined the intricate relationship between linguistic capital, social stratification, and code-switching practices in urban multilingual communities, revealing how language functions as both a marker and mechanism of social inequality. The findings demonstrate that access to prestigious languages such as English is unevenly distributed across social classes, with upper-class individuals enjoying significant advantages in education, employment, and institutional participation, while lower-class individuals face systematic barriers that limit their social mobility. Code-switching emerges as a strategic practice that serves different functions across social strata—for upper-class speakers, it signals sophistication and symbolic power; for lower-class speakers, it represents a necessary tool for navigating dominant institutional spaces, often accompanied by anxiety and linguistic insecurity. The pervasive linguistic discrimination documented in professional, educational, and social contexts reinforces existing class hierarchies, positioning certain languages and varieties as legitimate while marginalizing others. Importantly, the study also reveals moments of resistance and agency, as marginalized communities maintain local languages as markers of identity and solidarity, challenging dominant language ideologies. These findings carry significant implications for language policy and educational practice. Addressing linguistic inequality requires more than simply providing access to prestigious languages; it demands systemic changes that recognize and value linguistic diversity, train educators to work effectively with multilingual students, and challenge the institutional ideologies that naturalize linguistic hierarchies. Without such interventions, language will continue to function as a gatekeeping mechanism that reproduces social stratification across generations. Future research should explore how digital communication and transnational mobility are reshaping linguistic capital in contemporary urban contexts, and examine the intersection of language with other dimensions of inequality including gender, ethnicity, and migration status. Ultimately, this study affirms that language is never neutral but deeply implicated in the production and reproduction of social power, and that achieving greater linguistic equity is essential to broader struggles for social justice in increasingly diverse societies.

## References

1. Bhatt, R. M. J. T. h. o. l. and globalization (2010). "Unraveling post-colonial identity through language." 520-539.
2. Block, D. (2013). *Social class in applied linguistics*, Routledge.
3. Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*, Harvard university press.
4. Breitborde, L. B. J. I. j. o. t. s. o. l. (1983). "Levels of analysis in sociolinguistic explanation: bilingual code switching, social relations, and domain theory." 1983(39).
5. De Costa, P. I. J. D., Netherlands: Springer. Doi (2016). "The power of identity and ideology in language learning." 10: 973-978.
6. Friedman, J. J. A. A. (2003). "Globalizing languages: Ideologies and realities of the contemporary global system." 105(4): 744-752.

7. Guy, G. R. J. L. T. C. S. (1988). "Language and social class." 4: 37-63.
8. Labov, W. J. A. A. (1964). "Phonological correlates of social stratification." 66(6): 164-176.
9. Lu, X., et al. (2022). "Examining social class and multilingualism through the Linguistic Landscape: A methodological proposal." 8(1): 32-55.
10. Morton, J. M. J. J. o. P. P. (2014). "Cultural code-switching: Straddling the achievement gap." 22(3): 259-281.
11. Ntentema, P. (2022). "The challenges in the intellectualisation of indigenous languages in post-apartheid South Africa: what will it take to give the indigenous languages a directive in the implementation and monitoring of language policy in South Africa?".
12. Philips, S. U. J. A. c. t. l. a. (2004). "Language and social inequality." 474-495.
13. Rojas, B. G. J. B. o. L. and L. Studies (2025). "Code-switching as identity negotiation in multilingual communities." 2(1).
14. Sahgal, A. J. E. a. t. w. S. p. (1991). "Patterns of language use in a bilingual setting in India." 299-307.
15. Scotton, C. M. and W. J. I. J. o. t. s. o. l. Ury (1977). "Bilingual strategies: The social functions of code-switching." 1977(13).
16. Skutnabb-Kangas, T., et al. (2010). "The global politics of language: Markets, maintenance, marginalization, or murder?": 77-100.
17. Wang, S. and A. J. C. I. i. L. P. Hatoss (2023). "When the linguistic market meets the tea business: language attitudes, ideologies and linguistic entrepreneurship in the Blang community in China." 24(2): 160-178.