



## ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

### Multilinguals' Choice of Language with Families, Friends, and Acquaintances during Online and Offline Interaction

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The aim of the present study is to investigate and compare the choice of language used in an online platform (Facebook) and during offline communication with reference to a family member, a friend, and an acquaintance in the same multilingual speech community. As part of this study, a structured sociolinguistics questionnaire was administered to 38 multilingual postgraduate students. This is followed by interviewing selected focus group to elicit more information on various factors that influence their language behavior. The major finding of this study is that apart from family circle, a majority of multilingual users in India prefer to use English for Facebook private communications only among friends and acquaintances while Mother tongue is the dominant language use for offline communications.

**Keywords:** Multilingual, India, Facebook, Language, Family, Friend, Acquaintance.

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## Introduction

The comparison between face to face and Social Networking Site (SNS) communication has received much attention in recent years. This is due to continuous increase in the number of people using SNS for close communication caused by easy and affordable access to electronic network in the world (“World Internet Users Statistics and 2015 World Population Stats,” n.d.). Latest statistics showed that the current users of SNS stands at 1.96 billion compare to 0.97 billion in 2010 (Leading countries based on number of Facebook users 2014 | Statistic,” n.d.). Out of all the current Web 2.0 applications serving the global online community, Facebook is regarded as the most used SNS with 71% of users (“Social Media Site Usage 2014 | Pew Research Center,” n.d.). However, this increase has caused a drastic proliferation of different languages online, which allow more people especially in multilingual countries to access it (Pimienta, Prado, & Blanco, 2009).

There are millions of Facebook users in India. The country is currently ranked second with the highest number of Facebook users after United State (“Leading countries based on number of Facebook users 2014 | Statistic,” n.d.). India is a multilingual country with over 20 regional languages, out of which Hindi designated as the official language. It also uses a three-language formula, which requires children to learn Hindi, English and the local language of the community. Thus, an average literate Indian is proficient in at least three languages (Bhattacharya, 2002). According to Annamalai (2001), this multilingualism sustained by primary and secondary socialization process, which occurs in different domains such as home, marketplace and workplace. He further stated that multilinguals are influenced in their choice of language use by the function and the purpose each language s in different domains. For instance, a language may use for revealing ethnic identity, another for conducting business transaction and official dealings as well as for entertainment. Studies on various factors influencing language choice and use in different parts of India have received much attention in recent years. A study by Taylor, D. M., Mahadevan, R., and Koshal, S. (1978) *on the Language Choice among Kannada-Hindi-English Sspeakers in Mysore* showed that majority of the community prefers their Mother tongue (Kannada) or Hindi over English for communication. In another study to determine the dominant score of language use in family, friendship and institutional domain showed that Mother tongue is highly spoken in the family domain (Saghal as cited in Vasanta, D., Suvarna, A., Sireesha, J., & Raju, S. 2010). This investigation has extended to other public domains such as legislature, judiciary, administration, intellectual exchange, and commerce among Telugu, Hindi and English speaker that reside in the city of Hyderabad. The findings revealed that in all the domains used in the study, English was preferred over Hindi and Telugu in the city (Bapuji, 1994). Taking all these research findings in language behavior into account, it is convenient to argue that the factors influencing the language choice during face to face communication can have implication on diverse forms of online communication such as private (personal messages and/or chat) and semi public communication (wall post and status update) offered by Facebook. There are several ways of using Facebook to communicate with mutual friends. These methods include wall post, personal message, status update and Facebook

chat. A private message on Facebook is a confidential message which is usually sent to an individual message box while the wall post are messages sent to an individual walls and can be viewed by everyone in the users network of contact. Even though, Facebook refers to every individual in the user's network of contact as a "Friend", but it possesses a tool that allows users to organize and classify people on their contact of network. A user given an option of listing an individual as a friend, acquaintance or family. In order to add an individual as a family, a user need to make use of Smart list that contains other lists such as Work, School and City. Facebook has a policy of notifying only individual you add as a family and suggestion also made to such individual to add you into the family section too. Users tend to add their best friends in close friend list, which gives them the privilege to see more of them in their News Feed and notify each time they post. Meanwhile users can add individual who they often message or follow their wall posts to their acquaintance list. This list is likely to consist of old classmates, business contacts, and distant colleagues and so on. The implication of this list is that the user less sees News Feed from contacts on this list. Considering these three level of interpersonal relations on Facebook, It is logical to argue that every user is incline to have more acquaintance followed by close friends, then family.

Recent study investigating the differences and similarities of language choice between Face to Face and Facebook communication conducted by Cunliffe, D., Morris, D., & Prys, C. (2013). Their study on Welsh speakers in a bilingual environment showed that the language use on SNS is a reflection of the language used for face-to-face communication. However, many studies have reported the comparison between face-to-face communication and Facebook, there has been very little research reported in a multilingual setting with respect to three level of interpersonal relationship such as family, close friend and acquaintance that exist in user's network of contact on Facebook.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify the choice of language used in offline and online communication (using Facebook as a platform) and the factors that influence such language choice with respect to family, close friends and acquaintance among different community of multilinguals in India.

## **Methodology**

### *Materials and Methods*

The aim of this research was to compare the language use on Facebook chat among different groups of multilingual users for face-to-face communication with private communication. This experimental approach adopted a positivist position by collecting primary data from postgraduate students whose age range between 23 and 27. It then compared the observed results and conclusions made regarding the choice of language use for Facebook and face-to-face communication.

The data have been collected in a Central University located in South India. The site has been selected for data collection because it comprises students from different multilingual entities from various parts of India. All the students are proficient in at least in three languages, which include Hindi, English and their respective State language. Some of the participants from South India speak Telugu,

Kannada, Tamil, and Malayalam while those from the North speak Oriya, Bengali and Marathi. This provided the opportunity to conduct a pan India multilingual studies.

One of the major factors that influences any Indian multilingual speaker language behavior during face-to-face interaction and during social media communication is the level of confidence to speak and write in both the official languages while assuming that such confidence already exist concerning the use of Mother tongue. Therefore, in order to ascertain that all the participants are proficient in the country's official languages, asked participants to express their level of confidence in Hindi and English. A questionnaire administered to about 55 respondents, but 38 were considered for this study because of their confidence to write and speak in Hindi, English and their respective Mother tongues. This anonymous questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part dealt with demographic questions which require the respondents to answer questions such as the level of proficiency in spoken and written of Hindi, English and their respective mother tongue, estimate number of friends on their Facebook friend list and their percentage composition with respect to family, friends, and acquaintance, usage of Facebook friend list features and number of years they have been using Facebook. On the other hand, the second part requires the participants to nominate individual from their circle of family, friends and acquaintances. The nominated individual must fulfill several criteria. Firstly, he or she must belong to the respondents' multilingual community and their competency in both spoken and written languages accommodated in the speech community must be vouched for. Secondly, the nominee must be a friend of the respondent on Facebook.

This nomination process is followed by questions to examine and determine the choice of language used for offline and Facebook communication such as status update and chat. Thereafter, a selected focus group of the respondents were probed in order to understand some of the factors that influence their language choice and use. All the different multilingual groups were represented in the focus group. This is aimed at providing a thorough qualitative data for a study whose sample size is small. Finally, the quantitative data findings were analyzed using relevant mathematical procedure.

### *Results*

Data obtained in a previous study conducted in a Welsh-English community showed that students prefer to use English on their Facebook profile and status (Cunliffe et al., 2013). Their data also shows that language use for communicating on Facebook is a reflection of language use for offline communication. In this present study, language use for communication on Facebook platform and during offline interactions with family members, friends and acquaintances were determined among different Indian multilingual subjects

As shown in Table 1, out of the 55 graduate students that participated in this study, only 38 students' responses were considered for analysis because of their confidence to write and speak in both English and Hindi. Meanwhile, many of the participants are confident in speaking English (51) than speaking Hindi (42) while

38 and 42 students have confidence in their writing capability in Hindi and English respectively.

**Table 1.** Confidence in Speaking and Writing in both English and Hindi

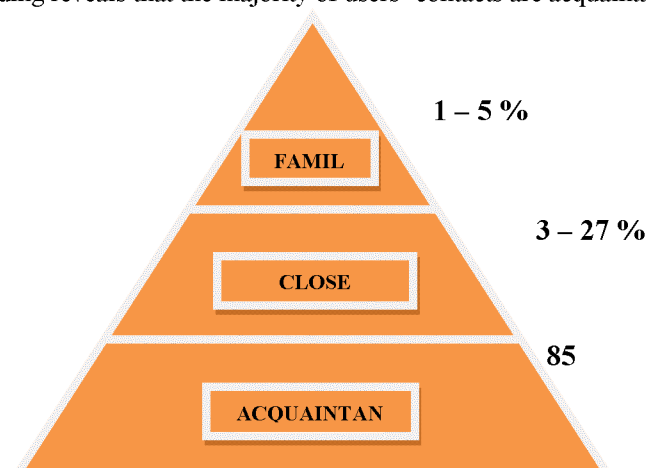
	Very Confidence		Neither Confidence/Unconfidence		Not Very Confidence	
	Speaking(n)	Writing(n)	Speaking(n)	Writing(n)	Speaking(n)	Writing(n)
English	51	47	-	3	4	4
Hindi	42	38	8	6	5	11
Both	38		-		13	

Table 2 shows the usage of the friend list organizer tool among the respondents in this study. A large proportion of the respondents are not using this tool to classify people on their network of contacts into family, friends and acquaintances. For example, more than 90% of the respondent has never made use of this organizer. However, every respondent can obviously identify and classify every individual on their network of contact into friend, family and acquaintance. Meanwhile, the number of contacts of all the respondent ranges from around 100 to about 2000 while their activities on Facebook ranges from 2 years to 6 years.

**Table 2** Usage of Facebook Friend List Feature

USERS%	NON-USERS%	TOTAL %
7	93	100

Figure 1 shows the proportion of the respondents Facebook contacts that belongs to each level of connection. Family accounts for 1 to 5% of the family members in their friend list. Close friends (3% to 27%), then acquaintances follows (17% to 85%). This finding reveals that the majority of users' contacts are acquaintance.



**Figure 1.** Percentage Range of Family Members, Friends and Acquaintances in Respondents' Facebook Network of Contacts

Regarding the language use on Facebook status, 79% of the respondents reported using English in updating their status (Table 3). This follows by corresponding Mother tongue and Hindi, which account for 12% and 9% respectively. This result is consistent with what obtained in previous in Cunliffe et al. (2013) study.

**Table 3.** Language Use in Updating Facebook Status

English%(n)	Hindi %(n)	Mother Tongue %(n)
79(30)	9(3)	12(5)

Respondents' language choice for Facebook and offline communication with a family member, friend and acquaintance in the same multilingual speech community indicates that many of them use their respective Mother tongue for offline communication with their nominated family member. However, none of the participants uses Hindi for both mode of communication with their families. On the other hand, 53% and 63% are respondents that conduct their private chat in English on Facebook with their friends and acquaintance respectively while 42% and 32% prefer to use their mother tongue. Overall, it can be observed that more people chat in their respective Mother tongue than in English within their family circle while more respondents prefer to chat in English than in mother tongue among friends and acquaintance. Meanwhile, more people speak in their Mother tongue with family, friends and acquaintance than in English.

**Table 4.** Language Use with Families, Friends and Acquaintances in Face-to-face Communication and on Facebook Chat

Category	Communication Mode	Language of Communication			Total (%)
		English(n)	Hindi(n)	Mother Tongue(n)	
Family	Facebook Chat	37(14)	-	63(24)	100
	Offline	-	-	100(38)	100
Friend	Facebook Chat	53(20)	5(2)	42(16)	100
	Offline	19(7)	-	81(31)	100
Acquaintance	Facebook Chat	63(24)	5(2)	32(12)	100
	Offline	48(16)	4(2)	74(20)	100

## Discussion

According to demographic survey of key social network platform conducted by Pew research center (2015), 82% of Facebook users fall within the age group of 18-29. This is also evident in this study whereby all the respondents who are within the age group of 21 and 27 nominated their younger siblings as a family member they usually communicate with on Facebook. This is an affirmation that the population of Facebook users decreases with increase in age even though the number of users in all age group has increased over the years which is due to lack of time required for legitimate participation, the loss of deeper communication, content irrelevance, and issues of privacy as being pointed out by senior citizens (Hope, Schwaba, & Piper, 2014). However, studies have predicted that the number of old people embracing Facebook for communication are likely to rise because of their need to maintain

social connection with family, friends and community as a result of mobility limitation or other age-related issues (Bell, Fausset, & Farmer, 2013).

Since the launch of Facebook friend list feature in 2008, users can choose to categorize their relationship to family, friends, acquaintance or any form of relationship of their choice. The current study shows that less than 5% of the respondents make use of this feature. They claim either ignorance of the feature or lack of interest in making use of the tool for such classification on the SNS. This is an indication that the function of Facebook to most of its user is strictly for disseminating and receiving of information rather than defining their relationships with all their contacts (Baruah, 2012).

Updating status on Facebook is an avenue for users to share their thought or disseminate information to all individuals on their friend list. Several factors influence the language use on this platform. This includes status of the language in the user's society, linguistic diversity of all the contacts of the user, user's level of competency in each of the respective language as bilingual or multilingual. There are many multilingual entities spread across the States in India with the designation of English and Hindi as the official language. However, Hindi is not generally accepted especially in the southern part of the country. According to Nayar (as cited by Baldrige, 1996), Hindi is a compulsory subject in schools in northern part of India while most States in the southern part either ban the teaching of Hindi in schools or demand low level of competence from students. This has led to the popularity of Hindi in northern States of India. The majority of the respondents in this study are from southern part of India. They all declared their confidence in writing and speaking in English, Hindi and their respective Mother tongue. As can be seen in this study, over 70% of them preferred to publicize their thought in English in order to communicate with all their friends across India. The 9% that share update in Hindi are fragment of respondents from north India where the language is made compulsory for learning. Surprisingly, 12% still claimed that they broadcast in their Mother tongue even though they declared to be highly proficiency in spoken English. These are fraction of respondents that are afraid to publicize in English because of fear of committing grammatical mistakes on Facebook public domain. Several studies on the effect of anxiety on spoken English have been established over the years. For example, McCroskey, J. (1977) demonstrated how anxiety is capable of preventing people from speaking in public. Therefore, it can be concluded that anxiety of updating in English on Facebook because of fear of making mistake can be a carryover effect of their fear of making mistake in their spoken English during public or offline communication.

Findings regarding private offline and online communication revealed that apart from family, the respondents preferred to chat on Facebook in English among friends and acquaintance. However, more people favored the use of their Mother tongue than English, but there is a gradual decrease in the usage of Mother tongue across family, friend and acquaintance. This is in good agreement with the works of Saghal (1991) that indicated the dominance of Mother tongue in home domain.

The preference of English for chatting among the majority is due to challenge of using Indic scripts for local Indian languages as a typing interphase. Some of the

participants asserted how hard it is to express themselves in their Mother tongue while using this interphase. This is due to the complexity that stem from the structure of Indic scripts and the large number of character in each scripts (Joshi, Ganu, & Chand, 2004). He further stressed the slow pace of communication even with the use of language translator software such as Quillipad, which still makes it difficult to type in an acceptable speed except an individual who is well trained. Another reason given by the respondents is that the meaning of some words or phrases is better expressed in written Standard English rather than in Mother tongue. For instance, there are some lexicons in science and technology, which are not accommodated in regional languages. For example, there is no written translation for some technical terms such television, laptop and so on in Telugu language. This creates room for code mixing during Facebook communication, which is a common phenomenon among SNS users (Sharma, 2014). Furthermore, since English is the official and prestigious language in the country, then it is easy to conclude that many users may choose to chat in English especially with acquaintances that make up the majority of user's contact in the friend list. Most of the respondents preferred to interact with their acquaintance in a formal and official manner and they consider English as the appropriate language for such online interaction.

The significance of Facebook as a language-teaching tool revealed in this study. One of the respondents opts to chat in English with his younger sibling with the main objectives of improving the English language proficiency of his brother. He pointed out that the social media chat is the platform he uses to correct his brother English grammatical mistakes. This is in line with several studies that support the use of Facebook as a tool for improving proficiency of students taking English as second language , improving their writing abilities and educational purpose as a whole (Shih, 2013; Wang & Chen, 2013).

All these findings extend those of Cunliffe et al. (2013), confirming that in a multilingual setting such as India, an individual would prefer to share their thought in English while updating their status on Facebook. In addition, the improvement noted in this paper is the determination of language use for face to face and Facebook private communication with respect to family, friend and acquaintance. This study reveals that more people chat in Mother tongue than in English among their family while more people would rather chat in English than in their Mother tongue among friends and acquaintance.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has shown that English is the major language used for Facebook private communication only among friends and acquaintance while Mother tongue is the dominant language for offline communication. This study shed more light on the choice of language use online and offline among the three hierarchies of relations that exist in the society. It also gives insight into the status of most major Indian languages both in real world and on Facebook.

Most notably, this is the first study to my knowledge to investigate language use for offline and online among family, friends and acquaintance. The method used in



this study appears to be effective in determining the status of a language in offline and online mode of communication in both bilingual and multilingual environment.

However, some of the limitations are worth noting, for example, the study does not cover all the different major multilingual groups in India. Future work should therefore replicate this study with larger size of respondents that covers all the States of India in order to be able to affirm the status of English, Hindi and regional languages.

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**Appendix: QUESTIONNAIRE**

**Language use in Facebook Chat and Offline with a family, friend and acquaintance**

**SECTION: A Personal Information:**

1. Gender: Male <input type="checkbox"/>	Female <input type="checkbox"/>	2. Age : ..... years
3.3. Mother Tongue:		
4.4. Which other languages can you speak?		
5. i).....	ii).....	iii).....

**SECTION: B**

What is your perception regarding your confidence in both writing and speaking of English and Hindi? Evaluate each statement and circle in the appropriate number using the following scale where

**1=Not very confidence, 2=neither Confidence, 3=Very Confidence**

	Not Very Confident		Neither Confident		Very Confident	
	Speaking	Writing	Speaking	Writing	Speaking	Writing
English						
Hindi						

I. Do you use Facebook for communication? Yes  No

II. How many years have you been active on Facebook?-----years

III. What is the estimate number of contacts you have on Facebook?-----

IV. Do you make use of friend list feature on Facebook? Yes  No

V. What is the estimate percentage of the following in your Facebook contacts?

Family members -----% Friends -----% Acquaintances-----%

Nominate a family member, friend and acquaintance whom you have constant communication with on Facebook and offline. The nominee must be from your State of origin and you must be able to vouch for his or her competency in English, Hindi and Mother tongue.

Which of these three languages (English, Hindi and Mother tongue) do you use with each of this nominee on Facebook chat and offline?

Languages	English/Hindi/Mother Tongue		English/Hindi/Mother Tongue		English/Hindi/Mother Tongue	
	Facebook Chat	Offline	Facebook Chat	Offline	Facebook Chat	Offline
Family Member						
Friend						
Acquaintance						



## زبان منتخب چند زبانه‌ها در تعاملات حقیقی و مجازی با خانواده، دوستان و آشنایان

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هدف پژوهش حاضر بررسی و مقایسه‌ی انتخاب زبان به‌کاررفته در فضای مجازی (فیس‌بوک) و در ارتباطات حقیقی با اعضای خانواده، دوستان و آشنایان در جامعه‌ی گفتاری چندزبانه‌ها است. در بخشی از این پژوهش، پرسشنامه‌ی ساختگی زبان‌شناسی اجتماعی به ۳۸ دانشجوی چندزبانه‌ی مقاطع تکمیلی داده شد. سپس به‌منظور شفاف‌سازی اطلاعات بیشتر درباره‌ی عوامل متعدد تأثیرگذار بر رفتار زبانی آن‌ها، مصاحبه‌ای با گروه کانونی منتخب صورت گرفت. مهم‌ترین یافته‌ی این پژوهش نشان می‌دهد، جدا از حلقه‌ی خانوادگی، اکثریت دانشجویان هندی چندزبانه ترجیح می‌دهند فقط در ارتباطات خصوصی فیس‌بوک با دوستان و آشنایان از زبان انگلیسی استفاده کنند؛ درحالی‌که زبان مادری را در ارتباطات حقیقی بیشتر به‌کار می‌برند.

واژه‌های کلیدی: چندزبانه، هند، فیس‌بوک، زبان، خانواده، دوست، آشنا.

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