

## English Code Switching: A License for the Violation of Urdu Linguistic Taboos?

*Asma Sharif<sup>1</sup>, Afia Mahmood<sup>2</sup>, Tayyaba Safdar<sup>3</sup>*

### **Abstract:**

*Norms and values of any society rely heavily on language; language mirrors the core culture of a particular society with regard to the practices that are either allowed within that society or are forbidden. In Pakistan being a multi-lingual society, code switching could be observed as a commonly exercised phenomenon. The present study investigates the violation of Urdu Linguistic taboos via English lexical items through the process of code switching. 28 Urdu linguistic taboo words were selected. The words were categorized in six commonly existing categories. The data to investigate the research questions of the current study was collected from 100 under graduate and post graduate students of English department. The findings based on the quantitative data analysis indicate that English code switching has become a popular phenomenon among the speakers of Urdu language to mention taboo words, leading ultimately to the violation of Urdu Linguistic taboos. The study opens door for future researchers to investigate the violation of their own languages through code-switching*

**Keywords:** *Taboo, Linguistic Taboo, Code Switching*

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<sup>1</sup> Visiting Lecturer in English, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

<sup>2</sup> Lecturer in English, University of Education, Lahore, Pakistan

<sup>3</sup> Lecturer in English, University of Education, Lahore, Pakistan

## Introduction

Human actions are not governed by rationality only, very often societies possess shared values and criteria for acceptable conduct which members of that community are stimulated to observe. Through a set of agreed-upon norms and rules, a society and its culture guides thoughts as well as behaviour of its individuals. The set of such guidelines is normally known as societal norms, and if forbidden are called taboos, which have a powerful impact on human life and its ways. People follow the norms of their society in the way they eat, dress up or drive a vehicle along their sexual behaviour as well. A number of anthropologists have analysed the role and impact of social taboos and norms in various societies.

Taboo could be defined as an anti-social practice that members of a society are restrained to exercise. According to the Oxford Advance Learners Dictionary (Hornby, 2013), the word taboo could be explained as “a cultural or religious custom that does not allow people to do, use or talk about a particular thing as people find it offensive or embarrassing”. Encyclopaedia Britannica explains the word in terms of ban on certain actions that are believed to be too sacred to be spoken of, holy, dangerous or ill-fated for laymen to carry out.

Taboos are wide-ranging in every society inclusive of sexual undertakings such as incest, paedophilia or necrophilia. Dietary restrictions like the use of Halal and lawful kosher diets for Muslims and Jews, consumption of beef for Hindus or cannibalism in most of the societies are also related to taboos. As a result, taboos could be appalling and repugnant behaviours or acts that might include some functions of human body. All the taboos enlisted above may not be termed as universal with the exclusion of incest, which according to Freud is a universal taboo (Freud, 1913).

Significance as well as list of social taboos might change as time goes by. Some taboos get weakened and resultantly disappear from the norms of society or in reverse accepted by its members. While other taboos may get more strength and thus come forth as more dominant. Zelizer (1978, 1981) exemplifies life insurance policies, for an instance, had long been sneered at, but gradually became acceptable with the passage of time. Gallup surveys have reported suicide, divorce and human cloning as morally acceptable in the modern U.S., which were once considered as taboo topics (Dogan, 2015). Gao (2013) asserts while you are engaged in a conversation with English people, age and salary should be avoided, whereas, in China there is no prohibition of these topics in a conversation. However, human excretion and sexual intercourse are taboos in China.

At times, individuals have to use taboo words during their daily interactions, either for clarification of their speech or to communicate a social purpose, yet they show reluctance in using such words. Their reluctance and hesitation in the use of certain phrases or words emanates from the fact that those words are generally forbidden and are not allowed in speech as a set practice which has established itself as a social custom. By constant practice such linguistic practices become customary among members of a society and society brings this imposition on them. Hence, the sensitive nature of taboo words is highlighted through infliction of restraint on language users.

The intensity and strength of taboos varies across cultures; the harshness a taboo carries in a society, is not seriously felt in another society. Not only are the linguistic and social taboos forbidden due to their offensive nature, studies conducted to analyze taboos are also seen as being offensive and embarrassing. People avoid using such words and expect others to abide by the restraint imposed by society. They tend to replace linguistic taboos with other code-words, indirect expressions or certain synonyms to convey their meaning. It is

also seen that they turn to foreign words to translate their thoughts by means of code switching and describe words that are forbidden in society.

Replacement of taboo words with other words also takes form of code switching, that is, use of words from other languages to communicate the intended meaning. English code switching has surfaced as a very popular and observable phenomenon for the replacement of such linguistic taboos among the Urdu language speakers to make a mention of things or ideas that are considered taboo. Myres-Scotton & Ury (1977) explain code-switching as the usage of two or more than two philological items by a speaker, to mention the same situation and discourse as is prohibited by social norms.

Nevertheless, making a mention of linguistic taboos either through a code word, euphemistic expression, and a synonym or via switching codes, necessitates the violation of that linguistic taboo. English code switching is a notable occurrence to comment on taboo words that otherwise could not be even spoken or discussed in Urdu. In this way, the phenomenon of English code switching, in one way or the other, provides a license to the native speakers of Urdu language to violate linguistic taboos providing them with a level of comfort and ease.

Social and linguistic taboos are not openly discussed in societal events and gatherings not to speak of carrying out research on the topic. In Pakistan, certain Urdu words are considered taboos due to their touchy and sensitive nature. Such words are mostly related to sex, human wastes, names of certain animals and things. Hence, a study of linguistic taboos is a means to an end: to gauge the relationship that exists between a language and the society where that language is spoken.

## Research Questions

1. Does the phenomenon of English code switching provide a license to violate Urdu linguistic taboos in Pakistani settings?
2. What is the extent of using English code words while making a mention of Urdu linguistic taboos?

## Literature Review

Taboos either in the form of social practices or linguistic ones are a significant aspect of social communication. The word ‘taboo’ originated from Polynesian language wherein the actual words are “tapu” and “tabu” and it was borrowed by English language speakers in eighteenth century. Freud (1955) asserts that the term contains a religious affiliation in its original form. On the other hand, Steiner (1967:143) elaborates taboo as a prohibition that carries no penalty further than anxiety and embarrassment that arise as a result of breach of intensely rooted custom. Dewaele (2018) mentions Allen’s definition of taboo asserting that it is a linguistic act, which is considered as harmful and destructive in the particular societies.

Linguistic taboo is thus a term applied to a word, phrase or linguistic expression on the basis of its relation to the customary taboos of a society. As Qanbar (1990) suggests a linguistic taboo is a word, a topic or a phrase which, when said in public, causes embarrassment and a feeling of shame or incites an implication of shock and is offensive to the listeners’ sensibilities or their beliefs. Earlier studies of Mead (as cited in Allen, 2018) have labelled the use of taboo as something that will have detrimental effects on the part of the speaker. It is as if the participant has conducted some kind of perjury in the community. Even thinking of using a taboo word triggers the idea of being punished in an individual’s mind. The strength of a taboo lies in its submission; the larger the number of individuals

restrain from using a taboo, the stronger that taboo emerges. Allen calls it as the form of social cohesion (Allen, 2018).

McGee (1960, p.489) emphasizes that basic patterns of language are shared by residents of a community in the form of linguistic skills and habits. To Bernstein (1971) it is the manner of socialization that facilitates the development of linguistic codes from semiotics. Coulmas (1977, p.580) talks with reference to Linguistic relativity hypothesis as presented by Sapir (1929), and concludes that language acts as perceptual and theoretical filter. Trudgill (1987) purports that the phenomenon of taboos is the most fascinating way in which a society influences its language.

It is the notion of social penalty or punishment that enforces a taboo within a society, reactions and appalling attitudes of other people are the most familiar ones in this respect. Benabou & Tirole (2004) contend that social punishment could also be self-inflicted when an individual restrains from uttering certain linguistic items that are thought to be taboo for the fear of meeting awful reactions. Kamal (2013) asserts that speakers' approach to linguistic taboos derives from the source of those words.

In order to avoid the embarrassment from using linguistic taboos, people tend to use politeness strategies and euphemisms. Ghounane et al. (2017) mixed method research of the attitudes of Tlemcan people towards the use of Tlemcan linguistic taboos and Tamimi SA'D (2017) findings of Arab community in Iran is affirmative of these strategies.

However, earlier in the history, code-switching has also been seen to avoid the awkwardness. Haugen (1956) notes strictly speaking, code-switching denotes situations where codes are shifted by speakers in mid-speech. Auer (1999) suggests to take into consideration the cultural background, discourse events and social gatherings to better understand how and why speakers of a language switch codes during their speech. While

some speakers have been found to switch codes to add emphasis and highlight particular aspects of their talk, Gumperz (1982) found that code-switching could also reflect one's ethnic identity.

In the 1990's, studies were conducted on linguistic taboos in Chinese, Jordanian Arabic, Oromo and Nigerian culture, the findings of which are suggestive of the use of euphemisms and flowery language, and in some cases the use of coinage terms in place of tabooed words like kinship relations, sex and swear words in the respective cultures. The reasons for this are the socio-cultural and religious inclinations of the people. Seifried (2006) findings on the issue of linguistic taboos, however is suggestive that the attitude towards the use of tabooed words has changed in the American Society since the wide-spread reporting of the then-President Bill Clinton's love affair with his secretary. American society has developed itself as more liberal and open to use taboo words than before.

Reviewing the related literature, it becomes evident that most of the studies concentrated on linguistic taboos see taboos as being forbidden and least spoken part of the social norms and customs of a particular culture and society. The taboos words are ranked as the "lowest race", as humans are ranked in some societies and religions that no one will like to talk to or foster any sort of relations with. Bulusan (2019) findings suggests taboo words as bad and masculine. However, the utterance of these tabooed words also depends upon the contexts, where in some cases the speakers might show a positive response in using them to establish close associations.

The present paper attempts to investigate the phenomenon of English code switching for the sake of mentioning Urdu linguistic taboos. It will highlight the fact that the speakers of Urdu language feel more comfortable and at ease when using English codes for mentioning

the taboo words. Whereas the same speakers feel reluctance to use their own language for this purpose.

### **Methodology**

This section will help learners understand the data collection and analysis procedure, as well as the nature of selected linguistic items to be examined in the current research.

### **Nature of Study**

The present study is quantitative in nature. It uses a descriptive research design and positivist paradigm to identify the frequency at which Pakistani English users are inclined towards English code switching for Urdu taboo words.

### **Data Collection**

The taboo words were classified under 10 major themes, which are as follows:

1. Words related to Sex/sexual features
2. Human wastes
3. Words related to physical deformity/social flaws
4. Names of some Animals
5. Words related to certain occupations/ social status
6. Words for certain places
7. Words related to unlawful activities

### **Procedure**

The researcher observed all these categories of linguistic taboos very minutely and tested their sensitive and forbidden nature through informal meetings with the Urdu language speakers. After selecting and categorizing the linguistic taboo words, frequency of English language over Urdu in uttering these taboo words was to be examined. The quantitative data for this purpose was collected from 100 (53 female, 47 male) participants. They were the



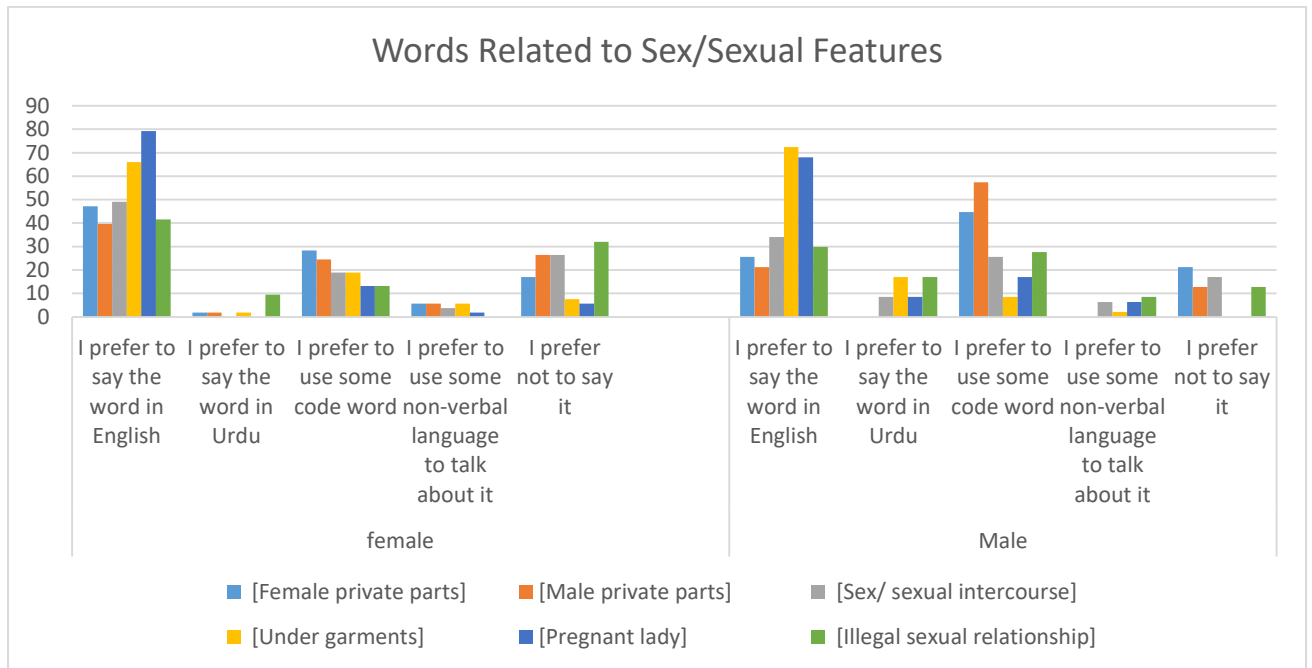
undergraduate and graduate students of English department from five different universities and colleges of Lahore. The universities and colleges selected were: University of Education, Lower Mall Campus, Lahore, University of Education, Bank Road Campus, Lahore, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Riphah International University, Lahore. Government Dyal Singh College Lahore. The students were selected through random sampling. A close ended questionnaire was used as the instrument for the data collection. The above mentioned categories of linguistic taboos were stated in the questionnaire and the participants were asked to select the most appropriate option from the five given options to say the Taboo Words. Five options were:

- I prefer to say the word in English
- I prefer to say the word in Urdu
- I prefer to use some code word
- I prefer to use some non-verbal language to talk about it
- I prefer not to say it

## **Results**

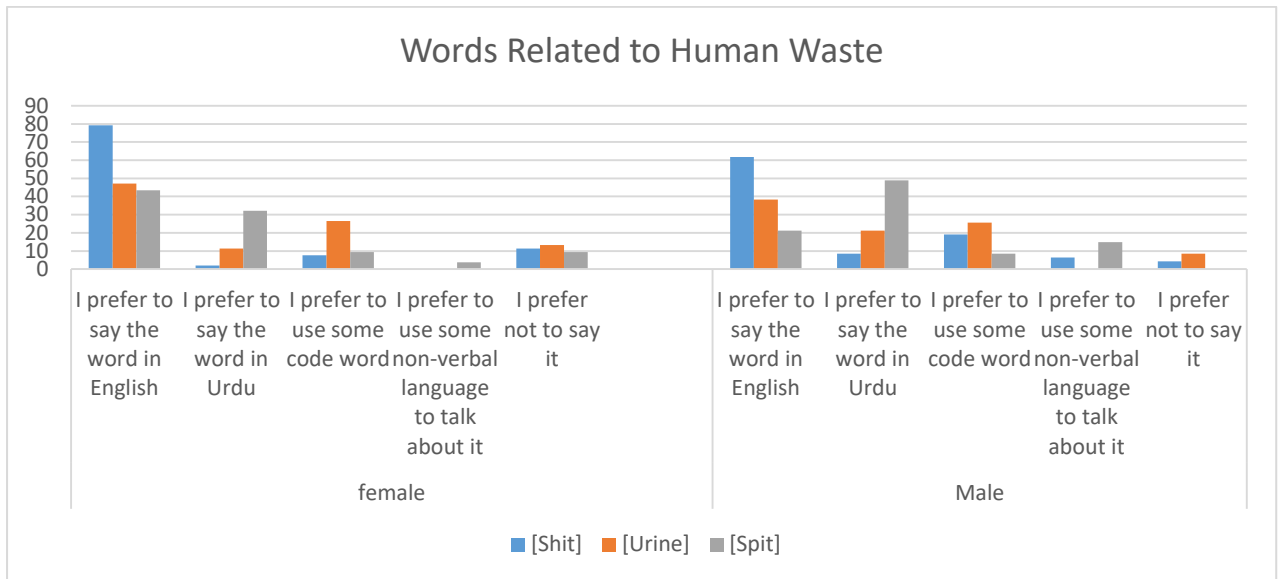
The data gathered for each category was analyzed in the form of percentage. The data of male and female participants has been compared to show any differences in the usage of the tabooed words.

### **Words related to sex/ sexual features**



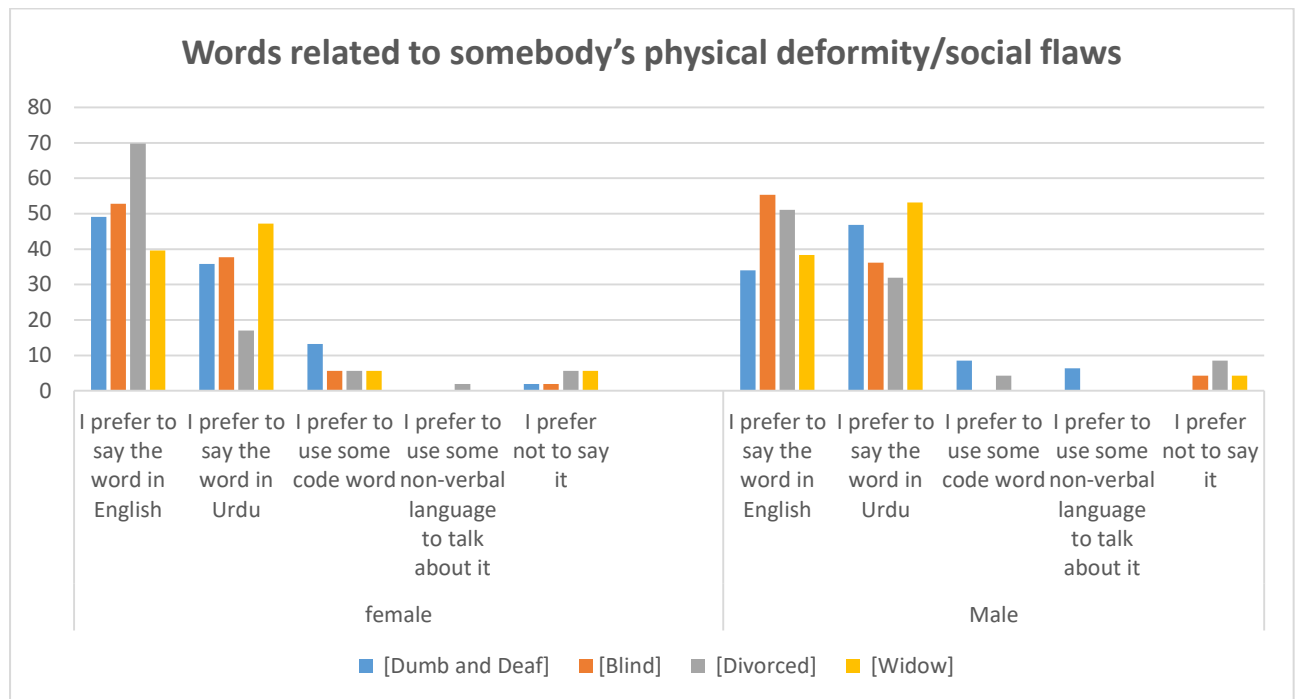
Graph No. 1 shows the results for first category, i.e., of taboo words related to sexual features. Around 80% of total participants (both male and female) showed their preference to use English codes in place of the Urdu linguistic taboos. Whereas only 10-15% of the participants preferred to use Urdu to mention sexual body parts. The percentage of male participants was relatively higher than the female participants. Most of the male participants (around 50%) and some female participants (around 30%) said that they prefer to use some code word instead of saying the actual word of this category. A few participants said that they prefer to use non-verbal language to refer to these words. Around 30% female participants also mentioned that they prefer not to say such words.

### Words associated with human wastes



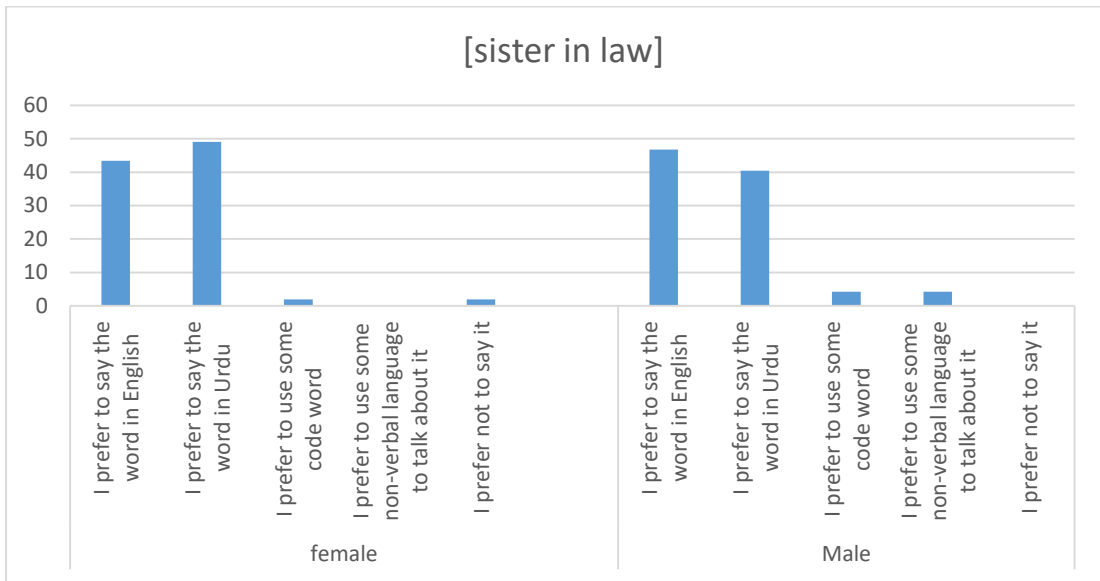
The graph 2 shows that 79% female participants and 62% male participants prefer to use the word shit in English, while only 2% female and 9% male participants prefer to say this word in Urdu. The preference to use the word “spit” in Urdu was relatively higher (32% female, 49% male) than the other two words (shit and urine) This shows that Pakistani society feels somewhat uncomfortable to mention words related to human wastes in public. Very few people said that they prefer to use some non-verbal language to mention these words.

**Words related to somebody’s physical deformity/social flaws**



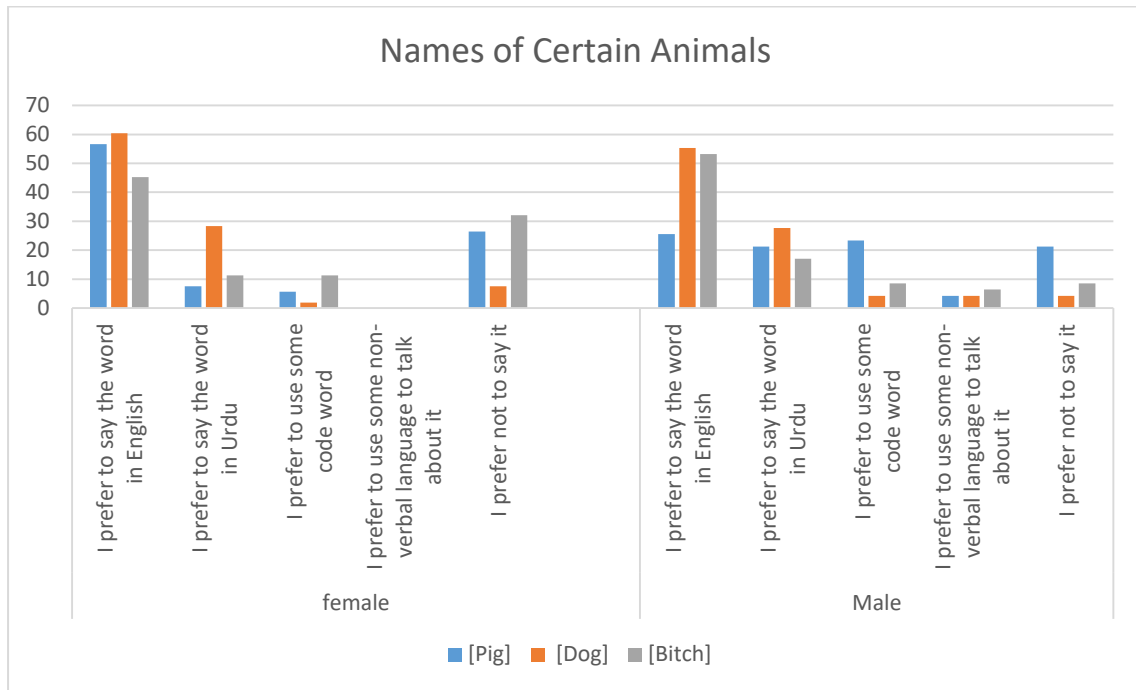
Graph. 3 indicates the results for the third category of the words that are associated with physical deformity or social flaws. It shows that most of the participants, 70% females and 51% males preferred to use the word “divorced” in English. While 53% female participants and 55% male participants they prefer to use the word “blind” in Urdu instead of English. The word that were most frequently said in Urdu were “widow, dumb and deaf”. Only a few participants said that they use some code words to mention these words especially “dumb and deaf” and “divorced”.

Words related to in-laws' relations



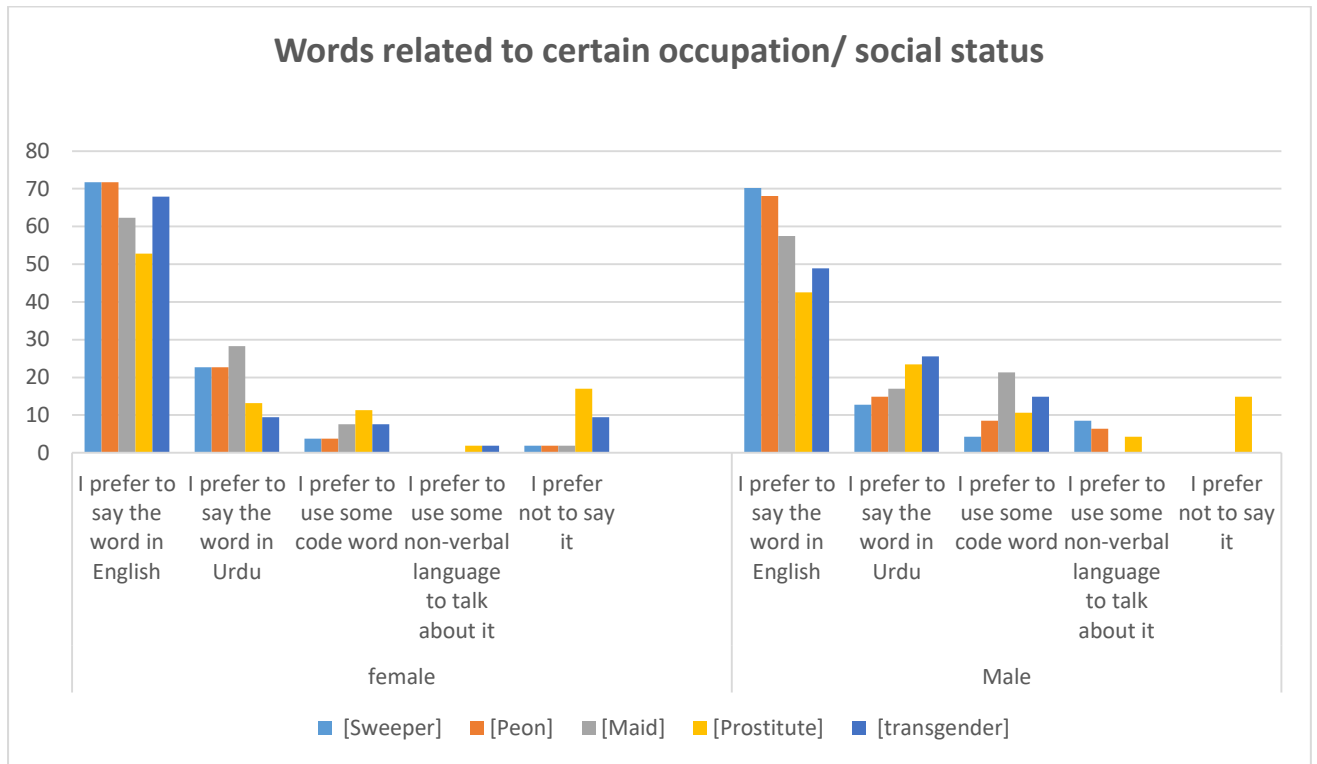
. Category number four was about a word related to in-laws' relations. The Urdu word used for "sister in law" سالی has two different sense . one is of-course the sister in law , while the second is used as an abuse. It was perceived that it is normally avoided to be used in Urdu because of its distinct senses. However, the results indicate that 43% female and 47% male participants preferred to use it in English, while 49% female, and 40% male participants preferred to use it in Urdu.

**Names of some animals**



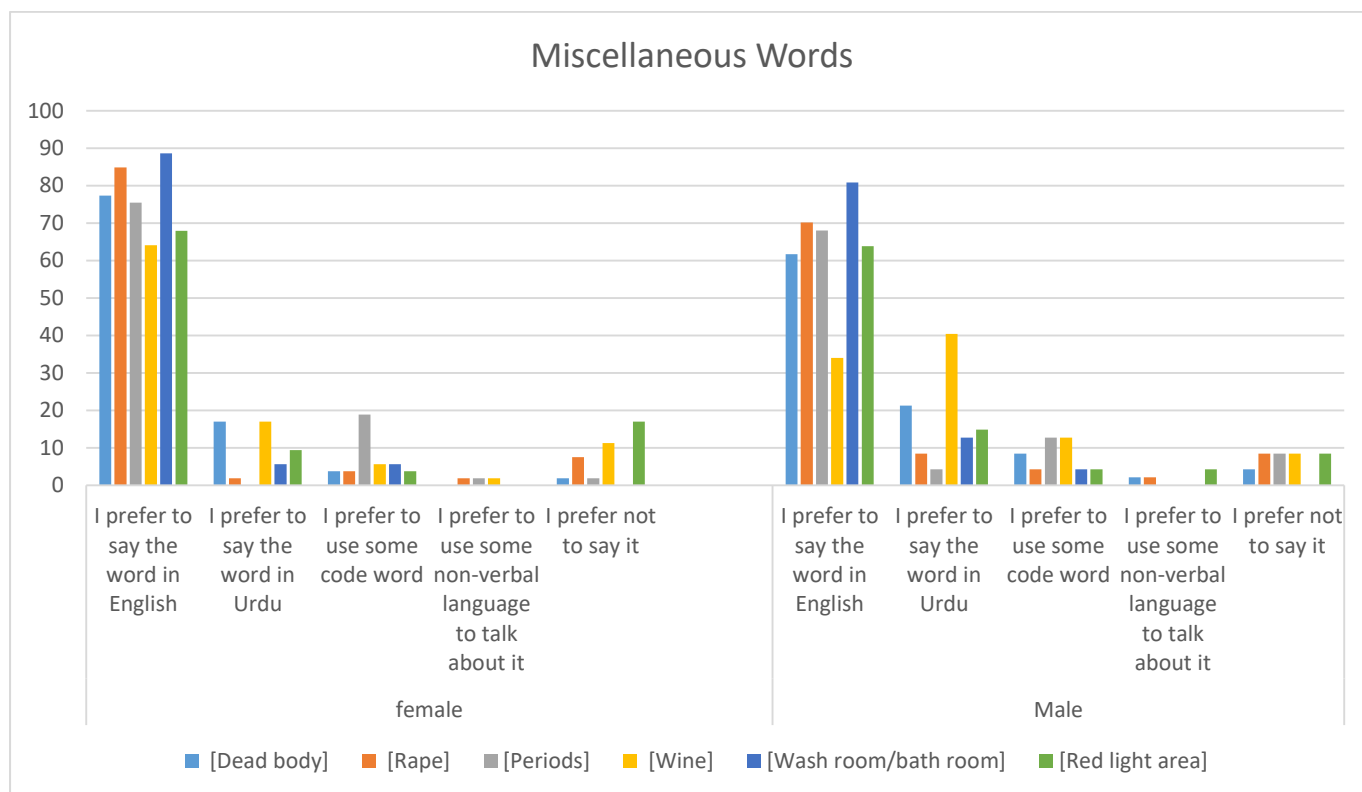
Graph 5 displays the results of fifth category which includes the names of certain animals which give two different senses. One sense refers to the literal meaning of the animal, the other refers to the abusive use of the word. These words are avoided because of social and religious reasons. The graph clearly indicates that most of the participants prefer to use these words in English instead of Urdu. A few participants around 30% prefer to use these in Urdu. While there is a small number which does not prefer to use these words at all.

**Words related to certain occupation/ social status**



There are certain professions and social roles which are not named openly in public because of some reservations such as offending the addressee, or the other participants involved in the communication. The graph clearly demonstrated that most of the participants prefer to use all of the word in this category in English, while a very small percentage uses these in Urdu.

**Some Miscellaneous Words**



There are a few words which are often replaced with English because it sounds awkward to use them openly in public. These words belong to the category of death (dead body, causality (rape), sickness (periods), or certain places (red light area, washroom). Results indicate that most of the participants around 80% female participants and 70% male participants prefer to use the words “dead body”, and “rape” in English. More than 80% of the participants said that they prefer to use the word washroom in English (in addition to the awkwardness of the word, another reason for this usage could be also be code mixing)

### Discussion

The major findings reveal that in most of the cases, students using Urdu language like to switch code to English language items as it somehow reduces the intensity of the discomfort that its public usage may cause. In order to talk about certain tabooed words, speakers of Urdu language love to switch to English language as it saves them from feeling embarrassed at the mention of those undertakings.



The use of words related to sex or sexual features in public causes embarrassment in most communities. While talking of sexual features and activities respondents showed a higher percentage of English code-switching, thus around 80% of total research population indicates that they prefer to mention sex-related linguistic taboos in English, as they seem to feel those words become less intense and embarrassing when used in English. Another major finding was use of certain miscellaneous words in English like rape, periods, death, red light area, and washroom.

The findings suggest that English language works as a license for students with Urdu as their native language to violate Urdu linguistic taboos. The responses obtained in all the seven categories support this assumption. Major findings of the study further strengthened the idea that English code-switching brings a great relief to speakers, and especially to the young students speaking Urdu language, whenever there arises a need to make a mention of Urdu linguistic taboos.

### **Conclusion**

Taboos either social or linguistic ones bring along a sense of embarrassment and shame to the individuals that violate them. Violation of linguistic taboos especially triggers a sense of remorse and makes listeners feel ashamed too. So, people usually choose to mention such words in another language or avoid speaking them altogether. The study was carried out on the basis of the presumption that English acts as a license to violate linguistic taboos of Urdu language, this was found to be true in the shade of the results. The results disclosed that the native speakers of Urdu language particularly students in the present case, feel more comfortable and easier when they are given a choice to use an English code instead of an Urdu word to mention a taboo word. The present study further opens new horizons to work in the field of linguistic taboos and code-switching. The research can also be done in this

perspective, using different languages, more categories and participants from a range of disciplines and backgrounds.

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## Appendix A

### Questionnaire

Sr. No.	Categories	I prefer to say the word in English	I prefer to the Urdu	say in	I prefer to use some word	I prefer to use some non-verbal language to talk about it	I prefer not to say it
1	Shit						
2	Urine						
3	Spit						
4	Female private parts						
5	Male private parts						
6	Sex/ sexual intercourse						
7	Under garments						
8	Pregnant lady						
9	Deaf and Dumb						
10	Blind						
11	Special/ handicap						
12	Divorced						
13	Widow						
14	Dog						
15	Pig						
16	Bitch						
17	Dead body						
18	Rape						
19	Periods						
20	Sweeper						
21	Peon						
22	Maid						
23	Prostitute						
24	transgender						
25	Wine						
26	Wash room						
27	Red light area						
28	Illegal sexual relationship						
29	Sister-in-law						