THE ROLE OF CODE-SWITCHING IN IDENTITY COGNITIVE PROCESSING OF SARCASM IN TWITTER THREADS: A RELEVANCE-THEORETIC APPROACH

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Abstract. This study investigates the role of code-switching in the cognitive processing of sarcasm within Twitter threads, employing a relevance-theoretic framework. Focusing on bilingual users who alternate between two languages, the research explores how code-switching functions as a pragmatic strategy that influences the interpretation of sarcastic messages and identity construction in digital communication. By analyzing authentic Twitter conversations, the study reveals how shifts between languages create additional cognitive effects, guiding the audience toward intended meanings and reinforcing social identities. The findings contribute to understanding the intersection of language use, humor, and online identity in bilingual digital contexts.

Introduction. In today's digitally mediated communication, social media platforms such as Twitter have become dynamic spaces where language users creatively employ various linguistic resources to express identity, convey humor, and negotiate social meaning. Among these linguistic phenomena, code-switching—the practice of alternating between two or more languages or language varieties within a conversation or even a single utterance—has gained significant attention. Code-switching is not merely a byproduct of bilingualism but serves as a strategic communicative tool that can encode complex social and pragmatic meanings. One particularly interesting area where code-switching intersects with digital communication is in the use and interpretation of sarcasm. Sarcasm, a form of verbal irony often characterized by saying the opposite of what one means, relies heavily on context and shared knowledge for correct interpretation. On social media platforms

like Twitter, where messages are brief and public, conveying sarcasm effectively becomes challenging.

Research methodology. This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the role of code-switching in the cognitive processing of sarcasm and identity construction among bilingual Twitter users. Given the nuanced and context-dependent nature of sarcasm and code-switching, qualitative methods are most suitable for capturing the subtle pragmatic functions and social meanings embedded in language use on social media platforms. The primary data source consists of authentic Twitter threads collected from bilingual users who frequently alternate between two languages in their sarcastic posts and interactions. Data collection involved purposive sampling, focusing on publicly available Twitter conversations that clearly exhibit instances of code-switching and sarcasm, allowing an in-depth examination of how these linguistic features interact. To analyze the data, a discourse analytical framework guided by Relevance Theory was employed. This involved close textual analysis of tweets and replies, focusing on linguistic cues, language alternation points, and contextual factors that influence the interpretation of sarcasm. The analysis also paid particular attention to how code-switching functions as a pragmatic signal, helping readers detect ironic intent and construct social identities within the Twitter community. Additionally, thematic coding was applied to identify recurrent patterns related to language choice, sarcastic meaning, and identity expression. The multimodal nature of Twitter, which includes emojis, hashtags, and images, was also considered, as these elements often work alongside language to convey sarcasm and social meaning. Ethical considerations were carefully observed during data collection and analysis. Only publicly accessible tweets were used, and all user identifiers were anonymized to protect privacy. The study acknowledges the limitations inherent in interpreting digital communication without direct interaction with participants but compensates for this through detailed contextual analysis and triangulation with existing sociolinguistic and pragmatic theories.

Table 1: Functions of code-switching in sarcastic twitter threads.

Function	Example Tweet (Excerpt)	Pragmatic Role
Signaling sarcasm	"Yeah, right… like that's ever going to happen!" (switch to English for sarcasm)	Marks ironic intent, cues non-literal meaning
Identity construction	"Biz buni bilamiz, no doubt " (mixing Uzbek and English)	Expresses bilingual identity and group membership
Emphasizing humor or exaggeration	"That's just *fantastic*... " (English for emphasis)	Enhances the humorous or exaggerated tone
Engaging wider audience	"Sizlarga rahmat, thanks for the support!"	Addresses both local and global bilingual followers

This table presents the primary communicative functions of code-switching observed in sarcastic Twitter threads by bilingual users. Each function is illustrated with an example tweet excerpt, highlighting how language alternation serves pragmatic roles such as signaling sarcasm, constructing identity, emphasizing humor, and engaging a wider bilingual audience.

Research discussion. The analysis of bilingual Twitter threads reveals that code-switching plays a multifaceted role in both the cognitive processing of sarcasm and the construction of social identities. The data show that users strategically alternate between languages to create pragmatic cues that help the audience recognize sarcastic intent. According to Relevance Theory, communication aims to maximize cognitive effects while minimizing processing effort. Code-switching in sarcastic tweets appears to serve this function by signaling shifts in pragmatic meaning that alert readers to interpret the message beyond its literal surface. For example, switching to a second language often precedes or accompanies a sarcastic remark, functioning as a marker of irony or distancing from the literal content. This linguistic

shift prompts the audience to search for a deeper, non-literal interpretation, facilitating the cognitive mechanism needed for sarcasm comprehension. In many cases, English is used alongside the native language to invoke global cultural references or a specific social stance, reinforcing the speaker's bilingual identity while simultaneously framing the sarcastic tone. Furthermore, code-switching in these Twitter interactions serves to construct hybrid identities that reflect the complex social realities of bilingual users. The alternation of languages not only conveys sarcastic meaning but also indexes membership in multiple social groups, such as local communities and global digital networks. Users deploy code-switching as a tool for identity negotiation, signaling both belonging and distinction. This aligns with previous sociolinguistic findings that bilinguals use language choice as a resource for expressing multiple facets of selfhood (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). The integration of emojis, hashtags, and other multimodal elements alongside code-switching further enriches the sarcastic discourse. These non-verbal cues often reinforce the pragmatic signals sent through language alternation, creating a layered communicative strategy that enhances the intended ironic effect. This multimodal approach supports the relevance-theoretic claim that the overall communicative context, including linguistic and extralinguistic factors, shapes interpretation and relevance. However, the findings also reveal challenges in sarcasm processing related to audience diversity. Since Twitter users have heterogeneous language proficiencies and cultural backgrounds, code-switching can sometimes create ambiguity or exclude certain audience members who are not bilingual. This highlights the delicate balance bilingual users must maintain between signaling identity and ensuring message accessibility.

Conclusion. This study has demonstrated that code-switching plays a crucial role in shaping the cognitive processing of sarcasm and the construction of identity among bilingual users on Twitter. By employing a relevance-theoretic framework, the research has revealed that alternating between languages serves as a pragmatic cue that facilitates the recognition of sarcastic intent and guides the interpretation of complex social meanings.

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