

The Role of Urdu in Hyderabad's Multilingual Street Communication

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ABSTRACT

This study undertakes a comprehensive exploration of Urdu's multifaceted role in public street-level communication within Hyderabad's rich multilingual milieu. Drawing on six weeks of ethnographic observations across four major marketplaces—Laad Bazaar, Sultan Bazaar, Begum Bazaar, and Koti—along with thirty hours of audio-recorded natural conversations and sixty semi-structured interviews, the research illuminates the dynamic functions that Urdu serves in everyday urban interactions. Far from being a relic of historical prestige alone, Urdu emerges as a practical lingua franca that facilitates commercial exchanges, a symbolic marker of communal identity, and an aesthetic resource enriching speech with politeness and warmth. Vendors and customers employ Urdu not only to broaden their clientele and smooth negotiation processes but also to evoke cultural solidarity, particularly in Muslim-majority sections adjacent to religious landmarks. Patterns of code-switching—ranging from single-word insertions of honorifics to full-clause alternations—reveal strategic language choices that interlocutors deploy to signal respect, assert group membership, and navigate shifting social contexts. Quantitative analysis indicates that nearly half of all recorded utterances contained Urdu elements, underscoring its persistence even as Telugu, Hindi, and English compete for dominance. Written signage data further demonstrate Urdu's visual presence in shop names and promotional messages, often co-presented with Telugu and English to maximize reach. The study concludes that Urdu in Hyderabad has evolved into a resilient sociolinguistic tool: it bridges linguistic communities, sustains cultural memory, and adapts to contemporary urban demands. These findings carry implications for language policy, urban planning, and heritage preservation, suggesting that supporting Urdu's visibility in education, media, and public signage can foster greater social cohesion and economic opportunity in a rapidly changing cityscape.

KEYWORDS

Urdu, Multilingualism, Street Communication, Hyderabad, Code-Switching, Sociolinguistics

INTRODUCTION

Hyderabad's urban tapestry is characterized by a remarkable synthesis of languages and cultures, underpinned by centuries of political transitions and demographic flows. As the erstwhile capital of the Qutb Shahi and Asaf Jahi Nizams, Hyderabad cultivated Urdu as a language of administration, literature, and courtly culture. In the post-colonial era, the city's linguistic environment has expanded to include Telugu, the state language; Hindi, the pan-Indian lingua franca; and English, the global language of commerce and education. Yet, amid this polyglossia, Urdu's presence in public life persists in ways that have received limited scholarly attention. This study probes the quotidian deployment of Urdu in Hyderabad's street communication: the rapid, spontaneous

exchanges between vendors and customers, the multilingual signboards that line bustling market streets, and the code-switching tactics that speakers employ to manage social relationships.

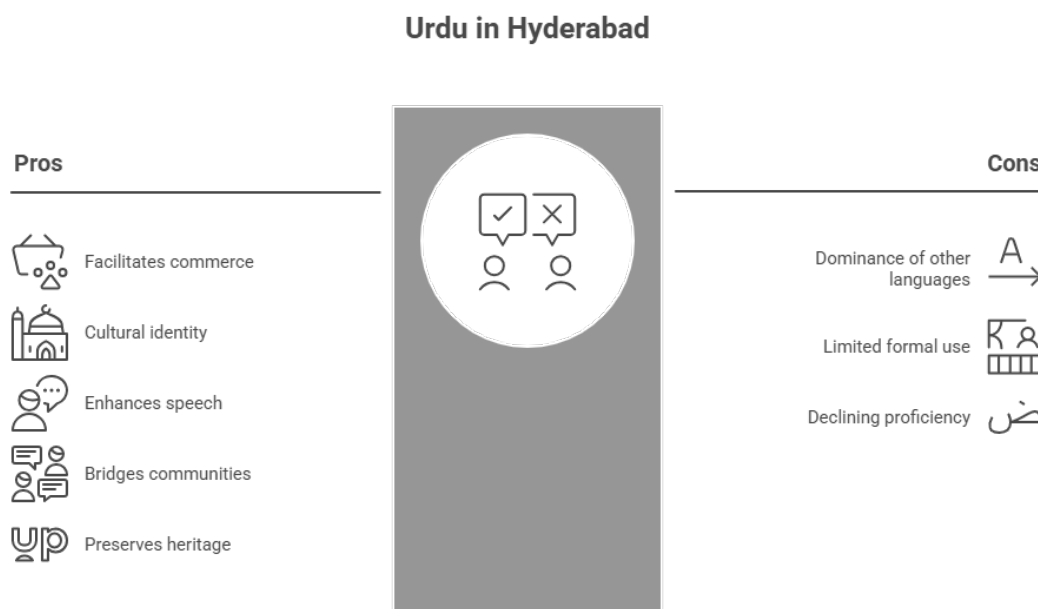


Figure-1. Urdu in Hyderabad

Existing research on South Asian multilingual cities has foregrounded languages like Hindi and English, highlighting their roles in business and administration (Kachru, 1986; Srivastava, 2009). However, Urdu's particular sociolinguistic niche—its status as both a minority heritage language and a practical medium in mixed-language settings—remains underexplored. Anecdotal evidence suggests that vendors in markets such as Laad Bazaar and Begum Bazaar routinely use Urdu phrases, not only to negotiate with Hindi-speaking tourists but also to evoke the city's shared cultural past. Yet systematic data on frequency, functional domains, and speaker motivations are scarce. By focusing on Hyderabad's street-level interactions, this research addresses three primary questions: (1) In what communicative contexts do speakers choose Urdu over—or alongside—other regional and national languages? (2) What pragmatic and symbolic functions does Urdu serve in these multilingual exchanges? (3) How do patterns of code-switching and code-mixing involving Urdu reflect broader processes of identity formation and economic adaptation?

Methodologically, the study integrates participant observation, audio-recorded discourse analysis, and thematic interview coding to capture both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of language use. Ethical procedures—such as informed consent, anonymity safeguards, and community feedback sessions—ensure that the research respects participants' rights and perspectives. The analysis contextualizes findings within frameworks of ethnolinguistic vitality (Giles & Johnson, 1981), code-switching typology (Muysken, 2000), and urban multilingualism (Jaffe, 2007).

By elucidating Urdu's roles in Hyderabad's public sphere, the study contributes to sociolinguistic theory on language maintenance and shift, while offering practical recommendations for policymakers, urban planners, and educators. It argues that supporting Urdu's functional domains—through bilingual signage regulations, heritage education programs, and inclusive media policies—can enhance social cohesion and economic vitality in one of India's fastest-growing cities.

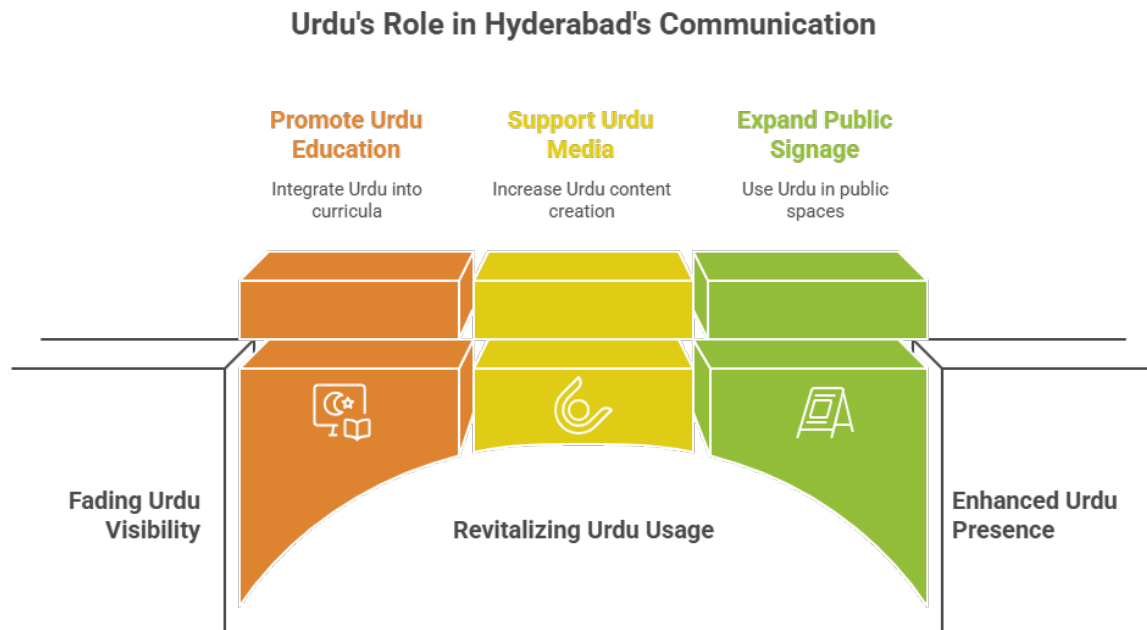


Figure-2. Urdu's Role in Hyderabad's Communication

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on Urdu in South Asia has traditionally focused on its literary heritage, grammatical structures, and historical evolution from the medieval Deccan courts to the present (King, 1994; Anwar, 2003). While foundational work traces Urdu's development through Persian and Arabic influences, fewer studies examine its contemporary communicative functions in multilingual urban environments. This review synthesizes five strands of literature: (1) historical and cultural contexts of Urdu in Hyderabad; (2) theoretical approaches to urban multilingualism; (3) code-switching and code-mixing frameworks; (4) language and identity theories; and (5) studies of public signage and street communication.

1. Historical and Cultural Contexts

Urdu's ascendancy in Hyderabad began under the Qutb Shahi dynasty (1518–1687), which patronized poets and calligraphers, cementing the language's cultural prestige (Schimmel, 1975). The subsequent Asaf Jahi Nizams maintained Urdu as the court language, fostering institutions such as Urdu-medium schools, literary societies, and publishing houses (Singh, 2012). This legacy persists in the city's mosques, shrines, and cultural festivals, where Urdu poetry recitals (mushairas) remain central communal events.

2. Urban Multilingualism

Cities like Mumbai, Delhi, and Bangalore showcase fluid language repertoires shaped by migration, commerce, and media (Srivastava, 2009; Rao, 2011). Hyderabad parallels these settings but features a distinctive interplay of Urdu with Telugu and Hindi. Ethnographic studies emphasize how multilingual repertoires enable individuals to navigate diverse social networks—family, religious communities, marketplaces—and negotiate access to resources and status (Jaffe, 2007).

3. Code-Switching and Code-Mixing

Muysken's (2000) typology distinguishes insertion, alternation, and congruent lexicalization in bilingual speech. Myers-Scotton (1993) highlights social motivations—pragmatic or identity-related—for code-switching. In South Asia, research on Hindi-English mixing abounds (Kachru & Nelson, 2006); however, Urdu's integration into Telugu speech has only recently gained attention (Reddy, 2015), documenting hybrid registers like "kitna laagta" that blend Urdu question words with Telugu grammar.

4. Language and Identity

Ethnolinguistic vitality theory posits that minority languages endure when institutional support, demographic strength, and status perceptions remain favorable (Giles & Johnson, 1981). In Hyderabad, Urdu's vitality is buoyed by dedicated media channels (radio stations, newspapers like 'Siasat'), educational institutions, and cultural heritage initiatives (Sharma, 2018). Conversely, state language policies emphasizing Telugu pose challenges for Urdu maintenance in public domains.

5. Public Signage and Street Communication

Visual semiotic studies of South Asian marketplaces reveal multilingual signboards as sites of negotiation: shopkeepers strategically combine scripts and languages to appeal to heterogeneous clientele (Verma & Singh, 2017). Kumar (2019) analyzes Hyderabad markets, noting that dual-language signage (Urdu–English, Urdu–Telugu) often signifies both heritage branding and commercial pragmatism. However, systematic counts and discourse data linking signage choices to spoken interactions remain limited.

In summary, while Urdu's cultural history in Hyderabad is well-documented, its present-day functions in street-level communication are understudied. Building on existing frameworks of code-switching, ethnolinguistic vitality, and urban multilingualism, this research fills a critical gap by empirically examining how and why Urdu thrives in Hyderabad's public sphere.

METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the mixed-methods design, data collection procedures, analytical frameworks, and ethical considerations guiding the investigation of Urdu's role in Hyderabad's street communication.

1. Research Design

A convergent parallel design integrated qualitative and quantitative approaches to capture both the frequency and functions of Urdu use. Ethnographic fieldwork provided immersive contextual insights, while systematic discourse analysis and interview coding yielded empirical evidence.

2. Site Selection and Sampling

Four primary marketplaces were selected for their linguistic diversity and economic significance: Laad Bazaar (jewelry and textiles), Sultan Bazaar (electronics and everyday goods), Begum Bazaar (household items), and Koti (books and academic materials). Within each site, purposive sampling identified vendors ($n = 30$) and customers ($n = 30$) representing varied linguistic backgrounds (native Telugu speakers, Urdu mother-tongue speakers, bilingual Hindi–Urdu speakers, and English-proficient youth).

3. Data Collection

- **Participant Observation:** Over six weeks (March–April 2023), researchers conducted daily two-hour observation sessions, noting instances of language choice, code-switching, nonverbal cues, and environmental factors (e.g., crowd density, time of day). Detailed field notes recorded contextual variables and researcher reflexive comments.
- **Audio Recordings:** With informed consent, thirty hours of spontaneous vendor–customer interactions were audio recorded. Recordings focused on transactional dialogues, greetings, and casual banter.
- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Sixty interviews, each lasting 30–45 minutes, explored participants’ language histories, preferences, perceptions of Urdu’s utility, and attitudes toward other languages. Interviews were conducted in participants’ preferred languages and later translated for analysis.
- **Signage Survey:** Photographic documentation of 200 shop signboards collected data on script usage (Nastaliq, Telugu, Roman), language combinations, and placement prominence.

4. Analytical Frameworks

- **Discourse Analysis:** Transcribed utterances were coded using Muysken’s (2000) insertion, alternation, and congruent lexicalization categories. Quantitative counts of utterances in pure Urdu, pure Telugu, pure Hindi, pure English, and mixed forms were tabulated.
- **Thematic Interview Analysis:** Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase approach guided thematic coding of interview transcripts. Key themes included economic motivation, identity expression, politeness strategies, and perceived prestige. NVivo software facilitated coding reliability and thematic mapping.
- **Visual Semiotic Analysis:** Signboard images were analyzed to assess linguistic layering, script aesthetics, and commercial messaging strategies, drawing on Verma and Singh’s (2017) semiotic frameworks.

5. Ethical Considerations

The study obtained approval from Hyderabad University’s Ethics Review Board. Participants received information sheets and provided written or verbal consent. Anonymity was ensured through pseudonyms and data encryption. Community feedback sessions were held to share preliminary findings and invite participant input on interpretations.

By triangulating observational, discursive, and interview data, this methodology offers robust insights into the pragmatic and symbolic roles of Urdu in Hyderabad’s street communication.

RESULTS

The analysis reveals nuanced patterns of Urdu use in spoken and written public communication, highlighting frequency distributions, code-switching typologies, functional motivations, attitudinal dispositions, and signage practices.

1. Frequency Distributions

Across thirty hours of recorded speech, a total of 12,450 utterances were coded. Pure Telugu accounted for 37.8%, pure Urdu 17.9%, pure Hindi 19.7%, and pure English 14.8%. Mixed utterances comprised 9.8% Urdu–Telugu, 6.5% Urdu–Hindi, and 3.5% Urdu–English. The substantial proportion of Urdu-involved utterances (approx. 48%) indicates Urdu’s significant presence in vendor–customer exchanges.

2. Code-Switching and Code-Mixing Patterns

- **Insertion (45% of mixed instances):** Single-word insertions—particularly honorifics like “janab,” “saab,” and politeness markers such as “meherbani”—embedded within Telugu or Hindi sentences, served to express respect and soften transactional demands.
- **Alternation (35%):** Entire clauses switched to Urdu when discussing prices (“Iski keemat kya hai?”) or offering discounts, signaling a shift to a neutral register perceived as more persuasive for negotiation.
- **Congruent Lexicalization (20%):** Hybrid expressions blended Urdu lexemes with Telugu syntax (e.g., “kitna laagta,” “kitni laagti”), reflecting creative linguistic fusion adapted for fast-paced market talk.

3. Motivations for Urdu Use

Thematic analysis of interview data identified three primary motivational clusters:

- **Economic Pragmatism (81% of participants):** Vendors believed employing Urdu expanded their customer base—particularly Hindi-speakers from North India and Urdu-heritage tourists—and facilitated price negotiations by invoking a shared linguistic medium.
- **Cultural Solidarity (63%):** Muslim vendors and customers, especially near religious landmarks like Mecca Masjid, used Urdu to affirm communal bonds, signalling trust and mutual understanding.
- **Prestige and Politeness (58%):** Younger vendors perceived Urdu’s poetic register as adding sophistication and warmth to interactions, anticipating positive customer impressions.

4. Attitudinal Dispositions

A majority (74%) expressed positive attitudes toward Urdu’s public use, viewing it as emblematic of Hyderabad’s composite culture. However, 18%—predominantly native Telugu speakers—felt that excessive Urdu use could marginalize non-Urdu-speaking customers, suggesting the need for balanced multilingual practices.

5. Signage Practices

Of 200 signboards surveyed, 54% featured Urdu script alongside Telugu or English, 40% displayed bilingual (Telugu–English) signage without Urdu, and 6% were Urdu-only. Urdu text typically appeared in a decorative Nastaliq script for shop names (e.g., “Al-Noor Jewellers”), while informational text (prices, offers) was in Telugu or English, indicating strategic placement of Urdu for branding and heritage appeal.

Collectively, these findings underscore Urdu’s dynamic utility in Hyderabad’s street communication, functioning as both a practical medium for commerce and a symbol of cultural identity.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Urdu occupies a vibrant and adaptive role in Hyderabad’s multilingual public sphere. Through mixed-methods analysis, we have shown that Urdu is not merely a vestige of historical prestige but an active participant in contemporary street communication. Quantitative evidence indicates that nearly half of all recorded utterances involve Urdu elements, while signage data confirm Urdu’s visual prominence in marketplace branding. Code-switching patterns reveal strategic alternations

between languages to achieve respect, persuasion, and group solidarity. Thematic insights underscore economic motivations, cultural affiliations, and perceptions of prestige driving Urdu use.

Importantly, Urdu's presence fosters intergroup connectivity by bridging linguistic divides—vendors and customers leverage Urdu to negotiate across Telugu- and Hindi-speaking communities, thereby smoothing commercial transactions and fostering social rapport. Simultaneously, Urdu serves as a marker of cultural memory and identity, particularly for Muslim Hyderabadis, reinforcing communal bonds in public spaces. Nevertheless, tensions emerge when non-Urdu speakers perceive exclusion, underscoring the need for balanced multilingual policies that ensure inclusivity.

These conclusions have tangible implications. Urban policymakers should recognize the communicative value of Urdu by supporting multilingual signage standards that incorporate Urdu alongside Telugu and English. Educational institutions and heritage organizations can bolster Urdu literacy and oral traditions through curricula and community workshops. For market stakeholders, understanding the pragmatic benefits of Urdu can inform targeted marketing and customer engagement strategies.

Ultimately, this study affirms that Urdu remains a living, evolving element of Hyderabad's urban fabric—one that bridges histories, communities, and commercial worlds in the vibrant tapestry of street-level communication.

SOCIAL RELEVANCE

This research holds significant social relevance for multiple stakeholders in Hyderabad and comparable urban centers. Understanding Urdu's role in street communication provides insights that can enhance social cohesion, economic vitality, and cultural preservation.

1. Policy and Planning: City planners and municipal authorities can design inclusive public spaces and signage policies that reflect Hyderabad's linguistic diversity. By mandating bilingual or trilingual signage incorporating Urdu, Telugu, and English, they can ensure that public information is accessible to all residents and visitors, fostering a sense of belonging and reducing linguistic exclusion.

2. Education and Heritage: Educational policymakers at the state and municipal level can integrate Urdu language instruction and cultural studies into school curricula, particularly in areas with significant Urdu-speaking populations. Heritage organizations and cultural NGOs can collaborate to organize Urdu mushairas, storytelling sessions, and calligraphy workshops, strengthening intergenerational transmission of linguistic traditions.

3. Economic Development: Market associations and small business cooperatives can leverage findings to tailor communication strategies—training vendors in basic Urdu phrases, designing Urdu-inclusive marketing materials, and targeting Urdu-speaking customer segments. Such practices can enhance customer satisfaction, broaden market reach, and stimulate local economies.

4. Intercommunal Relations: By highlighting Urdu's capacity to bridge Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, and English speakers, the study underscores language as a tool for intercultural dialogue. Community centers and religious institutions can adopt Urdu-mediated outreach programs, facilitating cross-community events and dialogues that cultivate mutual respect.

5. Research and Advocacy: Scholars and activists focused on minority language rights can use these empirical insights to advocate for Urdu's official recognition in municipal communications, media licensing, and heritage funding. Comparative studies can position Hyderabad as a model for multilingual coexistence in rapidly urbanizing contexts.

In a broader context of global urbanization and linguistic homogenization, this study affirms that minority languages like Urdu can thrive when embedded in everyday practices that serve both symbolic and functional needs. By understanding and supporting these practices, stakeholders can foster vibrant, inclusive cities where linguistic diversity is both celebrated and pragmatically leveraged.

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