



# Pragmatics of Code-Switching in Pakistani Comedy Talk Shows: A Corpus Based Analysis

## Research Article

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## Abstract

This study investigates the pragmatic functions of Urdu–Punjabi code-switching in the Pakistani comedy talk show *Khobarhar* (خبرہار) using Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995) as the analytical framework. Adopting a corpus-based mixed-methods approach, the study analyzes how code-switching operates at the levels of cognitive effort, cognitive effects, and audience-oriented pragmatic impact in televised humorous discourse. A spoken corpus was compiled from selected recent episodes of the program, systematically transcribed, and annotated. The data were manually coded and analyzed using MAXQDA, combining qualitative pragmatic interpretation with frequency-based patterns of code-switching functions. The findings demonstrate that Urdu–



Punjabi code-switching serves as a strategic pragmatic resource that enhances humor by reducing processing effort, increasing contextual relevance, and activating shared cultural schemas. Code-switching frequently occurs at punchlines and evaluative moments, generating humor through linguistic contrast, unexpected shifts, and localized cultural resonance. This study contributes to the growing body of research on bilingual humor and media pragmatics in South Asian contexts by empirically demonstrating how code-switching functions as a relevance-optimizing strategy in televised comedy discourse. The findings offer implications for pragmatics, media linguistics, and humor studies, particularly in multilingual broadcast settings.

**Keywords:** Code-switching, relevance theory, bilingual humour, Pakistani media

## 1. Introduction

In contemporary media environments, multilingual talk shows have emerged as influential sites for cultural representation, political commentary, and popular humor, particularly in linguistically diverse societies such as Pakistan. Within this context, language choice is never neutral; rather, it functions as a semiotic resource through which social identities, ideological positions, and audience alignments are constructed. Pakistan presents a marked case of asymmetrical bilingualism, where Urdu, the national and official language, dominates formal domains such as education, bureaucracy, and national broadcasting, indexing authority, legitimacy, and standardized public discourse. Punjabi, despite being the most widely spoken mother tongue in the country, remains largely confined to informal interaction, local storytelling, and everyday speech, where it is often associated with rurality, intimacy, and non-standardness. This unequal distribution situates Urdu–Punjabi bilingualism as a critical site for examining how language, power, and social meaning intersect in mediated discourse.

Mainstream Pakistani television has historically reinforced this linguistic hierarchy by privileging Urdu in serious genres such as news bulletins, political debates, and official commentary, while relegating Punjabi to entertainment-oriented formats, particularly comedy and satire. This patterned allocation constructs Punjabi as a humorous or “folksy” code, while Urdu is framed as the language of rationality and elite authority. Such genre-based compartmentalization is not merely stylistic; it reproduces broader language ideologies that shape how audiences perceive legitimacy, seriousness, and credibility. Comedy talk shows, therefore, operate as institutional spaces where these ideologies are simultaneously reproduced and strategically manipulated through code-switching.

From a linguistic perspective, comedy talk shows provide a fertile ground for examining how code-switching functions beyond simple alternation between languages. In these settings, switches between Urdu and Punjabi are deployed at specific interactional moments—such as punchlines, evaluative commentary, or character shifts—to trigger humor, manage audience expectations, and signal stance. Rather than treating code-switching as a background sociolinguistic phenomenon, this study approaches it as an observable pragmatic strategy, identifiable through recurrent patterns of linguistic choice, placement, and function within televised discourse.

Although code-switching has been extensively examined in sociolinguistics and conversation analysis for its role in identity construction, alignment, and discourse organization (Auer, 1998;

Muysken, 2000), its pragmatic contribution to humor in broadcast media remains comparatively underexplored, particularly in South Asian contexts. Existing studies on bilingual humor have largely concentrated on Western or Middle Eastern language pairs, such as English–Arabic or English–European language combinations (Filani & Onurisi, 2018; Salem, 2020; Georgalidou et al., 2022; Carvalho & Christoffersen, 2022). In these contexts, code-switching often indexes global prestige, cosmopolitan identity, or ironic distancing, dynamics that are not directly comparable to the Urdu–Punjabi relationship, where the tension lies between a national standard language and a socially stigmatized yet numerically dominant regional code.

Research from African and European comedy traditions further illustrates how multilingual humor operates under conditions that differ substantially from Pakistani television. African stand-up comedy studies frequently analyze live, highly fluid multilingual performances with minimal institutional constraints, while European studies often focus on closely related or mutually intelligible language pairs. By contrast, Pakistani comedy talk shows are produced within regulated broadcast environments, adhere to stable formats, and address a national audience with diverse linguistic competencies. These contextual differences limit the explanatory power of existing models when applied uncritically to Pakistani media discourse.

To address this gap, the present study adopts Relevance Theory (RT) (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995) as its analytical framework. RT offers a cognitively grounded account of communication, positing that speakers select linguistic forms that maximize contextual effects while minimizing processing effort. This framework is particularly suited to the analysis of bilingual humor, as it allows for systematic examination of how unexpected code-switches generate humor by disrupting audience expectations, activating shared cultural knowledge, and producing heightened cognitive effects. Unlike purely descriptive accounts of humor, RT enables the operationalization of code-switching in terms of processing effort, inferential payoff, and pragmatic impact, making it analytically robust for corpus-based investigation.

Within this media landscape, the Pakistani comedy talk show *Khabarhar* (خبرہار) constitutes a particularly salient site for analysis. The program combines parody, satirical news commentary, and character-based sketches, with performers routinely shifting between Urdu and Punjabi to enact social roles, critique political actors, and engage a live studio audience. Audience responses—such as laughter, applause, and verbal reactions—provide observable indicators of pragmatic success, allowing the relationship between linguistic choice and humorous effect to be examined empirically. The program’s hybrid format intensifies the need for strategic code-switching, as performers must balance accessibility, political resonance, and comedic timing within a nationally broadcast setting.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates how Urdu–Punjabi code-switching functions pragmatically to generate humor and audience engagement in Pakistani televised comedy. By applying Relevance Theory to a systematically compiled spoken corpus of *Khabarhar*, the study moves beyond anecdotal or impressionistic accounts of bilingual humor and offers an empirically grounded analysis of code-switching as a relevance-optimizing strategy. In doing so, it contributes to media pragmatics and humor studies while also addressing the underrepresentation of South Asian bilingual data in applied linguistics research.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does Urdu–Punjabi code-switching function pragmatically to produce humor in a Pakistani comedy talk show?
2. What cognitive and pragmatic effects does code-switching generate for the audience in terms of humor and engagement?

By answering these questions, the study seeks to demonstrate how bilingual linguistic resources are strategically mobilized in Pakistani media discourse and to refine the application of Relevance Theory within a multilingual, politically charged, and institutionally mediated genre.

## **2. Literature Review**

Code-switching (CS) and code-mixing are closely related but analytically distinct phenomena in bilingual and multilingual communication. CS generally refers to the alternation between two or more languages across turns or clauses to signal shifts in topic, stance, or interactional meaning, whereas code-mixing involves the embedding of elements from one language into another within a single utterance (Auer, 1998; Muysken, 2000; Tseng & Cashman, 2015). These practices are not random but socially and pragmatically motivated, serving functions such as clarifying meaning, indexing identity, expressing solidarity, and creating humour (Hoffman, 1991). Following Auer's (1998) interactional definition, and consistent with Appel and Muysken (2005), the present study treats CS as alternation at both inter-sentential and intra-sentential levels, which is particularly relevant for analyzing spoken media discourse.

In the Pakistani context, CS has been shown to be a pervasive and socially meaningful feature of televised discourse. Abdullah and Buriro (2020), examining Urdu television talk shows from a viewer-oriented perspective, found that audiences often interpret Urdu–English switching as a communicative resource that enhances clarity, expressivity, and perceived prestige. At the same time, concerns about excessive switching were linked to ideologies of linguistic purity and language decay. This work demonstrates that CS in Pakistani media is ideologically loaded and audience-sensitive, yet its focus remains attitudinal rather than cognitive or pragmatic, leaving unexplored how audiences process CS in real time, particularly in humorous settings.

From a broader theoretical perspective, pragmatic approaches to CS have emphasized its role in conversational organization and social meaning. Auer's (1995) sequential approach provides valuable insights into how CS structures turn-taking, repairs interactional trouble, and manages alignment between speakers. While this framework has been applied to bilingual humour and media interactions (Salem, 2020; Carvalho & Christoffersen, 2022), it primarily accounts for interactional sequencing and does not fully explain why certain switches are cognitively effective or humorous for audiences. Similarly, the Markedness Model (Myers-Scotton, 1993) and Gumperz's (1982) interactional sociolinguistics highlight socio-pragmatic motivations, identity negotiation, and contextualization cues, but they offer limited tools for analyzing cognitive effort and interpretive payoff, which are central to humour comprehension.

Relevance Theory (RT), proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) and extended by Yus (2004), addresses this limitation by framing communication as a balance between cognitive effort and cognitive effect. According to RT, speakers choose linguistic forms that maximize contextual effects while minimizing processing cost. This framework has proven particularly productive for analyzing humour, irony, and pragmatic inferencing in bilingual discourse. Filani and Onurisi (2018), for instance, demonstrated how code-switching in Nigerian comedy achieves humour by creating unexpected yet contextually accessible inferences. RT thus offers a principled account of how linguistic alternation generates humour through surprise, salience, and shared cultural assumptions, making it especially suitable for the analysis of bilingual comedy talk shows.

Within Pakistani television studies, CS has been examined not only linguistically but also ideologically and politically. Sultan et al. (2019), using Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, showed that comedy talk shows such as *Khabarnak* function as sites for negotiating power and political critique through satire, modality, metaphor, and multilingual resources. While their analysis acknowledges the presence of Urdu, Punjabi, and English, CS is treated as part of a broader discursive strategy rather than as a phenomenon with distinct pragmatic or cognitive effects. As a result, the mechanisms through which CS contributes specifically to humour remain under-theorized.

More recent studies have explicitly focused on humour in Pakistani comedy shows. Riaz et al. (2025), drawing on the General Theory of Verbal Humour, analyzed episodes from *Khabarnak*, *Mazakraat*, and *Hasb-e-Haal* and demonstrated that CS between Urdu, English, and regional languages is systematically used to construct satire, mark class distinctions, and deliver punchlines. Although this work offers important sociolinguistic insights, it does not model audience processing or examine how cognitive effort and contextual effects shape humorous uptake, nor does it focus specifically on Urdu–Punjabi switching.

International research further confirms the close relationship between CS and humour. Salem (2020) showed that insertional CS in Jordanian Arabic–English interactions produces humour by introducing unexpected linguistic contrasts, while Carvalho and Christoffersen (2022) highlighted similar effects in Spanish–Portuguese switching in Uruguay. Studies from other regions have also emphasized identity construction and audience engagement through CS in comedic contexts (Mutheu, 2015; Georgalidou et al., 2022). However, these studies are context-specific and do not address the unique sociolinguistic ecology of Pakistan, where Urdu and Punjabi carry distinct ideological, regional, and class-based meanings.

Collectively, existing Pakistani and international literature establishes that CS is central to media discourse and humour construction. Nevertheless, several gaps remain. First, Pakistani studies have largely focused on Urdu–English switching, political discourse, or ideological critique, with limited attention to Urdu–Punjabi alternation. Second, most analyses prioritize social meaning and discourse functions while neglecting the cognitive mechanisms that make CS humorous and engaging for audiences. Third, empirical work rarely integrates corpus-based methods with pragmatic theory to systematically link specific switches to audience responses such as laughter or applause.

Addressing these gaps, the present study applies Relevance Theory within a corpus-based framework to examine the pragmatics of Urdu–Punjabi code-switching in a Pakistani comedy talk show. By focusing on cognitive effort, cognitive effect, and observable audience responses, the study advances existing research by offering a fine-grained, theoretically grounded account of how bilingual humour operates in Pakistani media discourse.

### 3. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-method research design, integrating quantitative corpus analysis with qualitative pragmatic interpretation, to investigate the use and functions of code-switching (CS) between Urdu and Punjabi in a Pakistani comedy talk show. A mixed-method approach was selected to capture both the measurable distributional patterns of CS and its context-dependent pragmatic effects, particularly in relation to humour and audience engagement.

#### 3.1 Data Selection and Corpus Construction

The data for this study were drawn from the Pakistani comedy talk show *Khabarhar* / *خبربھار*, a widely viewed program known for its sustained use of bilingual humour and satirical discourse. Episodes were selected from 2024 on the basis of the show’s popularity and sustained audience reach, as indicated by IMDb popularity rankings and viewership trends. To ensure consistency and representativeness, only episodes featuring comparable formats, cast composition, and studio audience presence were included.

A spoken corpus of approximately 1 hour, 15 minutes, and 48 seconds was constructed from selected episodes publicly available on Aftab Iqbal’s official YouTube channel. The recordings were transcribed manually using a simplified conversation-analytic transcription system that retained lexical items, pauses, overlaps, and audience responses such as laughter and applause. Non-verbal reactions were transcribed in brackets to facilitate alignment with specific code-switching instances. All proper nouns and culturally specific references were retained to preserve pragmatic context.

#### 3.2 Identification and Coding of Code-Switching

Code-switching instances were identified following Auer’s (1998) interactional definition, encompassing both inter-sentential and intra-sentential alternation between Urdu and Punjabi. Each instance was treated as a unit of analysis. Code-mixing involving single lexical borrowings without pragmatic salience was excluded to maintain analytical focus.

The transcribed data were imported into MAXQDA for systematic coding and annotation. A theory-driven coding scheme was developed based on Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995) and refined through an initial pilot coding phase. The final coding categories included:

- type of code-switch (inter-sentential / intra-sentential),
- direction of switch (Urdu → Punjabi / Punjabi → Urdu),
- pragmatic function (e.g., punchline delivery, satire, irony, character indexing),

- cognitive effort (low / moderate / high),
- cognitive effect (e.g., humour, emphasis, surprise),
- audience response (laughter, applause, verbal comments, or no response).

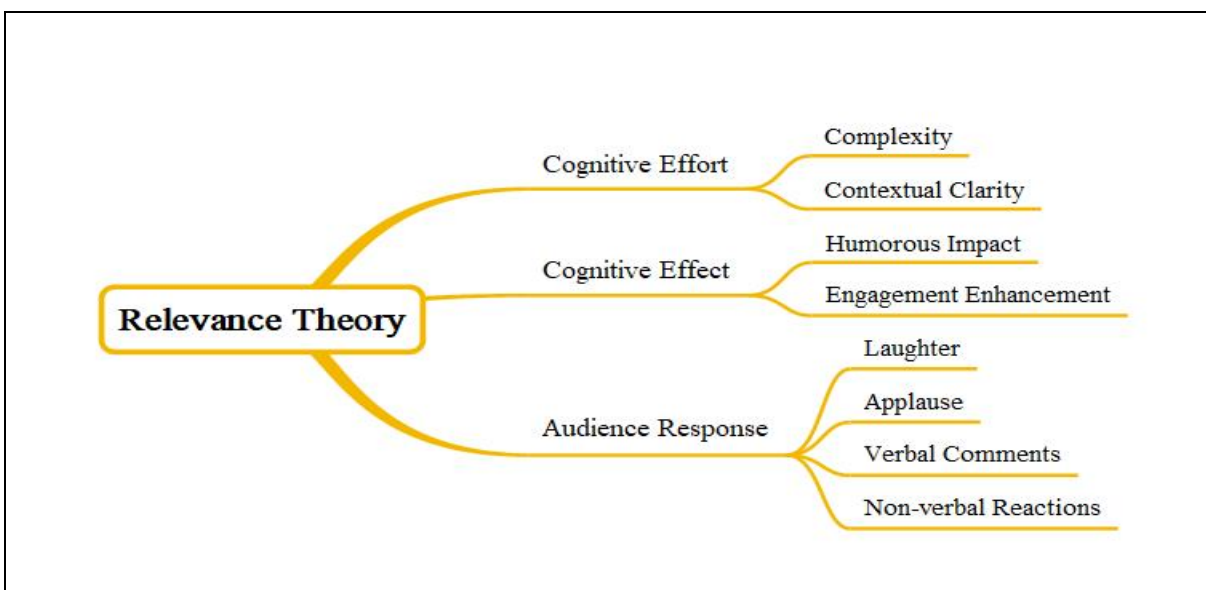
The coding scheme and category definitions are provided in the Appendix to enhance transparency and replicability.

### 3.3 Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in two stages. First, quantitative analysis was conducted to examine the frequency, distribution, and patterns of Urdu–Punjabi CS across the corpus. Descriptive statistics were used to identify recurrent switching patterns and their association with observable audience responses. This stage established which types of CS were most frequently linked to humour and engagement.

Second, qualitative pragmatic analysis was carried out to interpret how CS functions within specific conversational contexts. Drawing on Relevance Theory, each selected instance was analyzed in terms of the balance between cognitive effort and cognitive effect. Particular attention was paid to how unexpected linguistic shifts, culturally loaded expressions, and regional indexing contributed to humour by creating salient inferential effects with minimal processing cost. Audience reactions were used as empirical indicators of successful relevance, following previous applications of RT to humorous discourse (Filani & Onurisi, 2018; Salem, 2020). RT helps analyse the cognitive load imposed on the audience by CS, as presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Framework for Relevance Theory



### 3.4 Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in Relevance Theory, which conceptualizes communication as an inferential process guided by the search for optimal relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995). According to the Cognitive Principle of Relevance, human cognition tends to maximize relevance by achieving the greatest cognitive effect with the least processing effort, while the Communicative Principle of Relevance assumes that every ostensive act of communication carries a presumption of optimal relevance (Wilson & Sperber, 2006).

In the context of a multilingual comedy talk show, code-switching functions as an ostensive stimulus that signals increased relevance to the audience. When effectively deployed, CS introduces unexpected linguistic and cultural contrasts that heighten salience and facilitate humour. Although CS may increase initial processing effort, this cost is offset by strong cognitive effects such as surprise, recognition, and shared cultural inference, resulting in laughter or applause. Figure 1 illustrates the analytical framework used to map cognitive effort, cognitive effect, and audience response within the relevance-theoretic model.

### 3.5 Reliability and Analytical Rigor

To enhance analytical rigor, a subset of the data was recoded after a time interval to ensure consistency in category application. Ambiguous cases were resolved through repeated contextual review of the audio-visual data. The integration of quantitative frequency patterns with qualitative pragmatic interpretation further strengthened the validity of the findings by allowing cross-verification of results.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings of the corpus-based analysis of Urdu–Punjabi code-switching (CS) in the Pakistani comedy talk show *Khabarhar*/خبرہار. Using MAXQDA, the analysis examined CS in terms of cognitive effort, cognitive effect, and audience responses, in line with the assumptions of Relevance Theory. The results are first presented quantitatively and then interpreted qualitatively with illustrative extracts from the corpus.

### 4.1 Cognitive Effort

Cognitive effort was operationalized through two sub-dimensions: complexity and contextual clarity. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of these categories.

Table 1: Numerical Results of Cognitive Effort

Level	Sub-level	Scale	Percentage
<b>Cognitive Effort</b>	Complexity	Low	14.73
		Medium	0.27
	Contextual Clarity	Medium	0.14
		High	14.86

The results show that the majority of code-switching instances were characterized by low complexity and high contextual clarity. This indicates that switches between Urdu and Punjabi were generally easy for the audience to process and were strongly supported by the surrounding discourse and shared cultural knowledge. From a relevance-theoretic perspective, such switches require minimal processing effort while remaining highly accessible to viewers, making them suitable for real-time televised humour.

These findings suggest that performers deliberately avoid linguistically complex or ambiguous switches, which could disrupt comprehension. Instead, CS is used in ways that align with audience expectations and shared sociolinguistic norms, supporting the claim that code-switching in comedy talk shows is a strategic and audience-oriented practice rather than a spontaneous or random choice.

## 4.2 Cognitive Effect

Cognitive effect was examined in terms of humorous impact and engagement enhancement, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Numerical Results of Cognitive Effect

Level	Sub-level	Scale	Percentage
<b>Cognitive Effect</b>	Humorous Impact	High	4.05
		Medium	4.05
		Low	7.16
	Engagement Enhancement	High	14.05
		Medium	0.81
		Low	0.27

The findings reveal that while the humorous impact of CS varies, engagement enhancement is predominantly high. This indicates that not all instances of CS aim to produce overt humour; however, even non-humorous switches contribute to maintaining audience attention and involvement. This distinction is important, as it demonstrates that CS functions both as a humour-generating device and as a broader engagement strategy within the talk show format.

From the perspective of Relevance Theory, these results suggest that even when the humorous payoff is moderate or low, CS can still generate sufficient cognitive effects, such as clarity, emphasis, or social alignment, to justify the processing effort required by bilingual alternation.

## 4.3 Audience Responses

Audience responses were categorized into laughter, applause, verbal comments, and non-verbal reactions. Table 3 presents the distribution of these responses.

Table 3: Audience Responses

Level	Sub-level	Scale	Percentage
<b>Audience Responses</b>	Laughter	Strong	3.51
		Moderate	4.59
		Weak	0.14
	Applause	Strong	0.54
		Weak	0.54
	Verbal Comments	Positive	9.59
		Neutral	5.54
		Negative	0.14
	Non-verbal Reactions	Smiling	7.97
		Silence	7.16

Positive verbal comments and smiling were the most frequent audience responses, indicating a generally favorable reception of CS. Moderate laughter further reflects a consistent level of audience enjoyment. These findings support earlier Pakistani studies which argue that audiences perceive code-switching as an effective and familiar communicative resource in media discourse (Abdullah & Buriro, 2020; Batool et al., 2025).

Importantly, silence and neutral responses also appear in the data, showing that audience engagement does not always manifest through laughter. This reinforces the argument that CS serves multiple pragmatic functions beyond humour, including explanation, emphasis, and alignment with shared cultural perspectives.

#### 4.4 Integrated Findings

An integrated overview of the findings is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Integrated View of Findings

Category	Sub-category	Percentage
<b>Cognitive Effort</b>	Complexity	15.00
	Contextual Clarity	15.00
<b>Cognitive Effect</b>	Humorous Impact	15.26
	Engagement Enhancement	15.13
<b>Audience Responses</b>	Laughter	8.24
	Applause	1.08
	Verbal Comments	15.27
	Non-verbal Reactions	15.13

The relatively balanced distribution across cognitive effort and cognitive effect categories indicates that CS in *Khabarhar* is systematically optimized for relevance. The findings confirm that performers consistently manage the trade-off between processing effort and communicative payoff, a central assumption of Relevance Theory.

## 4.5 Discussion

The quantitative patterns are further illustrated through selected extracts from the corpus. The following section discussed these findings, illustrated with specific extracts from the transcribed spoken corpus, and compared them with results from prior studies.

### Extract 1

سن 1947 وچ بہت لاس ہویا، لیکن سن 1947 دے وچ کی ملیا پاکستان ملیا، فام 47 دے وچ سانو حکومت ملی، ادے وچ کوی لبھا چوڑا لاس نہیں ہویا۔ کوئی پریشانی نہیں ہے گی ساڈے جیڑے لیڈر الحمدللہ، او سچے لیڈر نے۔

(Episode 16 \_7 June\_2024)

### Coding

- Cognitive effort: low complexity, high contextual clarity,
- Cognitive effect: no humorous impact, high engagement enhancement,
- Audience Responses: no laughter, no applause, neutral verbal comments, and silence in non-verbal responses.

Extract 1 demonstrates CS used primarily for informational purposes rather than humour. The low complexity and high contextual clarity allow easy comprehension, but the absence of humour results in neutral audience responses. This supports Hoffman's (1991) observation that CS can function as a tool for clarification and message reinforcement rather than entertainment.

### Extract 2

او چائنا گئے آ، کسینو نہیں گئے۔

(Episode 16 \_7 June\_2024)

### Coding

- Cognitive effort: low complexity, high contextual clarity,
- Cognitive effect: Medium humorous impact, high engagement enhancement,
- Audience Responses: moderate laughter, no applause, positive verbal comments, and smile as non-verbal responses.

### Extract 3

تواڈے کدی آٹیب لگی؟ کیونکہ بہت آسان آ، توانو تے زور دی ہوا وی لگے تے آٹیب ای لگنی، لو، یقین کرو مینو نچھ آئی میں منہ پرے نو کر لیا کتے توانو نا آٹیب لگ جائے۔

(Episode 17 \_8 June\_2024)

## Coding

- Cognitive effort: low complexity, high contextual clarity,
- Cognitive effect: high humorous impact, high engagement enhancement,
- Audience Responses: moderate laughter, no applause, positive verbal comments, and smile as non-verbal responses.

Extracts 2 and 3 illustrate how CS introduces unexpected linguistic elements that trigger humour. The switches are cognitively light and contextually motivated, resulting in moderate laughter, positive comments, and smiling. These findings align with previous studies showing that insertional CS can create humour through novelty and cultural resonance (Salem, 2020; Carvalho & Christoffersen, 2022).

## Extract 4

اگوں ہسی جان ڈئے نے اونو سمجھاو ایداں دے سر وچ نہیں سب لگدے۔

(Episode 17 \_8 June\_2024)

## Coding

- Cognitive effort: low complexity, high contextual clarity,
- Cognitive effect: high humorous impact, high engagement enhancement,

Audience Responses: strong laughter, Strong applause, positive verbal comments, and smile as non-verbal responses.

Extract 4 represents the most effective use of CS, producing strong laughter and applause. Here, the switch maximizes cognitive effects while requiring minimal processing effort, perfectly aligning with the relevance-theoretic principle of optimal relevance (Wilson & Sperber, 2006). This example clearly demonstrates how Urdu–Punjabi switching functions as a powerful humorous resource in Pakistani comedy talk shows.

## 4.6 Discussion in Relation to Previous Research

Overall, the findings align closely with both international and Pakistani scholarship on bilingual humour and media discourse. In particular, the results corroborate Filani and Onurisi's (2018) application of Relevance Theory to comedic interaction by demonstrating that code-switching in *Khabarhar* systematically balances low processing effort with high cognitive payoff. By extending this framework to a South Asian televised context, the study shows that Relevance Theory is equally effective in explaining humour and engagement in Pakistani bilingual media.

The findings also complement recent Pakistani studies (Batoool et al., 2025; Riaz et al., 2025) by offering a more fine-grained, empirically grounded account of how code-switching operates at the levels of cognitive effort, cognitive effect, and observable audience response. While earlier work has emphasized sociopolitical positioning, class performance, and identity construction, the present

study adds a cognitive-pragmatic dimension that explains *why* certain switches succeed in eliciting laughter, applause, or sustained engagement.

At the same time, this research moves beyond much of the existing literature by focusing specifically on Urdu–Punjabi code-switching rather than the more commonly examined Urdu–English alternation. In doing so, it foregrounds the role of regional languages in shaping humour, audience alignment, and affective engagement in Pakistani media, highlighting how linguistic hierarchies and local cultural knowledge are exploited for comedic effect.

More specifically, the humorous uses of CS observed in Extracts 2, 3, and 4 are consistent with findings from Salem (2020) and Carvalho and Christoffersen (2022), which show that unexpected or strategically timed switches can generate humour through surprise and cultural resonance. These patterns also resonate with Batool et al. (2025), who demonstrate that Pakistani television discourse uses code-switching to manage relational alignment and audience positioning. The consistently high engagement associated with these extracts further reinforces Filani and Onurisi’s (2018) claim that humour emerges when cognitive effects outweigh processing effort.

In contrast, Extract 1 illustrates the informational and clarificatory function of code-switching, lending support to Hoffman’s (1991) argument that CS serves multiple communicative purposes beyond humour. Taken together, these findings confirm that code-switching in Pakistani comedy talk shows is a multifunctional pragmatic resource, capable of producing humour, enhancing engagement, and facilitating comprehension depending on contextual demands.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examined the pragmatic functions of Urdu–Punjabi code-switching in the Pakistani comedy talk show *Khabarhar* / *خبر* through the lens of Relevance Theory, with a particular focus on humour creation and audience engagement. Using a mixed-method design, a spoken corpus was constructed, transcribed, and systematically coded in MAXQDA to capture patterns of cognitive effort, cognitive effect, and observable audience responses. By operationalizing these constructs, the study moved beyond descriptive accounts of code-switching and provided an empirically grounded analysis of how linguistic choices function in televised comedic discourse.

In response to the first research question, the findings demonstrate that humour is most effectively generated when code-switching involves low cognitive complexity and high contextual clarity. Such switches minimize processing effort for the audience while maximizing interpretive payoff, allowing humour to emerge through culturally resonant and linguistically accessible cues. Regarding the second research question, the results show that strategically deployed code-switching significantly enhances audience engagement, as evidenced by recurrent laughter, positive verbal comments, and affiliative non-verbal reactions. These patterns confirm that code-switching in *Khabarhar* operates as a deliberate pragmatic resource rather than a random or stylistic alternation.

The study contributes to existing scholarship by extending Relevance Theory to a South Asian media context and by foregrounding Urdu–Punjabi switching, a linguistic pairing that has received comparatively little systematic attention in pragmatics and media linguistics. In doing so, it

complements prior Pakistani research that has emphasized sociopolitical and identity-based functions of code-switching, while adding a cognitive-pragmatic explanation of how humour and engagement are achieved in real time.

Nevertheless, the study has certain limitations. The corpus is limited in size and restricted to a single comedy talk show, which constrains the generalizability of the findings across genres and broadcasters. Future research could address these limitations by expanding the dataset, incorporating multiple programmes, and comparing different comedy formats or language pairings. Quantitative testing across larger corpora may also further refine the relationship between specific types of code-switching and audience response.

Despite these constraints, the study offers robust evidence that code-switching in Pakistani comedy talk shows is a context-sensitive, cognitively motivated strategy that plays a central role in humour production and audience engagement. By highlighting the interplay between linguistic choice, cognitive processing, and media discourse, the research underscores the importance of integrating pragmatic theory with empirical media analysis in bilingual and multilingual settings.

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## Appendix

<b>Code System</b>	<b>Memo</b>
<b>Code System</b>	
<b>Relevance Theory</b>	
<b>Cognitive Effort</b>	
<b>Complexity</b>	
Low	Simple, easily understandable switch.
Medium	Moderate complexity, requires some effort to follow.
High	Complex switch, difficult to follow.
<b>Contextual Clarity</b>	
Low	Context is unclear or ambiguous.
Medium	Context is somewhat clear but may require some inference.
High	Context of the switch is very clear.
<b>Cognitive Effect</b>	
<b>Humorous Impact</b>	
High	The switch significantly enhances humor.
Medium	The switch moderately enhances humor
Low	The switch has little or no effect on humor
<b>Engagement Enhancement</b>	
High	The switch greatly enhances audience engagement
Medium	The switch somewhat enhances engagement
Low	The switch has little or no effect on engagement.
<b>Audience Responses</b>	
<b>Laughter</b>	
Strong	Loud and prolonged laughter
Moderate	Audible, brief laughter
Weak	Minor or scattered laughter
<b>Applause</b>	
Strong	Loud and sustained applause.
Moderate	Audible but brief applause
Weak	Minor or scattered applause
<b>Verbal Comments</b>	
Positive	Expressions of enjoyment or agreement
Neutral	Non-reactive or neutral comments
Negative	Expressions of confusion or disagreement
<b>Non-verbal</b>	
<b>Reactions</b>	
Smiling	Visible smiles from the audience
Nodding	Agreement or understanding shown by nodding
Silence	Lack of audible or visible reaction