

Linguistic Phenomenon: Language Play Among Multilingual Communities on Social Media

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Multilingual humor; Language play; Social media linguistics	The rapid growth of social media has transformed communication patterns, particularly in multilingual societies where language play (e.g., puns, wordplay) thrives as a creative and humorous form of interaction. Indonesia, with its rich linguistic diversity, serves as an ideal context to study this phenomenon, as social media users frequently blend regional languages, Indonesian, and foreign languages (e.g., English, Korean) to produce engaging and culturally resonant content. Despite its prevalence, research on multilingual language play in digital spaces remains limited, particularly regarding its linguistic mechanisms and sociocultural functions. This research aims to fill this gap by examining the types, techniques, and communicative roles of language games in Indonesian multilingual communities on social media. Using qualitative analysis, this study examines humorous multilingual content from Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Through purposive sampling of 100 public examples, it categorizes linguistic techniques and communicative functions, employing thematic and discourse analysis to uncover underlying patterns. The findings show that interlingual puns dominate, primarily using homophony for humor. These serve four key functions: aesthetic (beauty), interpersonal (bonding), cognitive (critical thinking), and ideological (social critique). They demonstrate multilingual speakers' adaptability in navigating diversity while fostering inclusivity. Such language play transcends entertainment, emerging as a sophisticated tool reinforcing cultural identity, social cohesion, and critical discourse. These findings have implications for sociolinguistic research, digital communication strategies, and language education, suggesting that humor and multilingual creativity can enhance cross-cultural understanding and pedagogical innovation. Future research could explore cross-cultural comparisons or the role of algorithms in shaping linguistic trends on social media.

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INTRODUCTION

The advancement of technology has encouraged humans to understand communication not only through one or two languages but through multiple languages. Indonesia, with its hundreds of islands, has made it possible for its people to master more than two or even three languages (Akmal et al., 2025). The diverse linguistic environment has enabled Indonesians to quickly adapt to new languages, further supported by modern technology that facilitates detailed language learning. Moreover, proficiency in languages such as English, French, Japanese, German, Indian, Korean, and Mandarin is increasingly common, especially in professional fields where multilingualism is often required (Cekaite & Aronsson, 2014). This growing multilingual ability contrasts with the declining use of a single language

(monolingualism), making the mastery of multiple languages increasingly prevalent (Alexander, 2017).

Multilingualism, or proficiency in more than two languages, enables more dynamic communication, particularly in regions where dialects share similar vocabulary, though with different meanings (Ely & McCabe, 2020). This situation often leads to humorous interactions, as multilingual speakers can manipulate words to create amusing exchanges (Dynel, 2018). Such interactions are common in Indonesia, where various languages are used, and technology facilitates the absorption and learning of foreign languages (Davies, 2020). Communication is not just an exchange of information but can also serve as entertainment or humor. In this context, multilingual speakers leverage their understanding of different languages to enhance conversations, turning them into amusing or light-hearted exchanges (Coulson & Williams, 2019). This phenomenon is closely tied to language games, which involve playing with words, sounds, and meanings to create humor or irony, as demonstrated in examples of homophonic language play between Bahasa Indonesia and English, where the similarity of sounds generates humorous effects (Chen & Wang, 2025).

The urgency of this study lies in the growing prevalence of language play on social media and its underexplored role in multilingual contexts. As digital platforms become primary spaces for communication, understanding how language games function in these settings is essential for several reasons (Hay, 2020). First, it sheds light on how globalization influences linguistic identity, as these games often blend local and foreign languages (Kaan & Swaab, 2015). Second, it reveals how humor and creativity bridge linguistic and cultural gaps in diverse societies (Kim & Tanaka, 2024). Third, it offers educational insights, demonstrating how language play can enhance language teaching methodologies by leveraging humor and engagement. Despite its significance, scholarly attention to this phenomenon, especially in multilingual communities like Indonesia, remains limited (Laineste & Voolaid, 2016).

Previous research on language play, such as studies by Wijana (2022) and Attardo (2001), has primarily focused on monolingual or bilingual contexts, leaving a gap in understanding multilingual interactions. Works like Chaer and Agustina (2010) and Jannah et al. (2017) have explored sociolinguistic aspects but lack depth in examining the communicative functions of language games in digital spaces. This study addresses these gaps by focusing on multilingual communities in Indonesia, analyzing data from social media platforms, and expanding the theoretical framework to include cognitive, ideological, and interpersonal functions of language play.

The novelty of this research lies in its comprehensive approach to language games in a multilingual setting. By examining how these games operate on social media, the study provides contemporary insights into linguistic creativity and adaptability. Additionally, it highlights the role of language play in fostering social cohesion, critical thinking, and cultural expression, offering a fresh perspective on its multifunctional nature.

Language games, as explored by Wijana (2022), exploit linguistic elements like sounds, syllables, words, phrases, and sentences to create meanings that deviate from the conventional or expected, often for humorous purposes. These games can either be intentional or unintentional, with intentional language play leading to jokes, and unintentional play resulting in humor. The examples provided, such as the pun between *renggang* and *rendang* or *jus* and

just a friend, illustrate how wordplay based on phonetic similarities can create surprising semantic shifts that trigger laughter. However, such humor relies heavily on mutual understanding between speakers. If one party does not understand the language or the cultural context, the humor may fall flat. This study aims to explore how these language games occur in multilingual communication, particularly within the context of Indonesia's multilingual society, where the blending of local languages and foreign languages often leads to spontaneous and humorous interactions. The research will delve into how these patterns of humor are formed and how language understanding plays a crucial role in the success of humorous communication.

The benefits of this study are manifold. Academically, it contributes to sociolinguistics and humor studies by providing a framework for analyzing multilingual language games. Practically, it offers valuable insights for educators and content creators on leveraging language play for engagement and learning. Culturally, it underscores the creative adaptability of multilingual speakers in preserving and innovating linguistic traditions. Through this research, we aim to deepen the understanding of language play as a powerful tool for communication, creativity, and cultural expression in multilingual societies.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method with a sociolinguistic approach to analyze language play in multilingual communities on social media. The data sources included direct field observations and content from social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and several journalistic websites. The data were recorded and analyzed according to scientific guidelines.

First, the study involved observing communication phenomena using one or two languages (Indonesian, regional languages, and foreign languages) that generated humor. Second, humorous content uploaded on social media was examined. Some videos were intentionally created by content creators to attract audience interest, reflecting current trends and prepared humor. Other humorous moments occurred accidentally within the footage, which also attracted the author's attention and were included as data.

Third, the data were selected and organized based on existing categories or relevant theories. Selection involved reading and sorting data from social media and journalistic sources according to predetermined criteria. Finally, the data were analyzed by categorizing them as intralingual or interlingual, examining the development of the language game patterns, describing these patterns, and drawing conclusions regarding the data categorization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Aesthetic Function

The aesthetic function in language play refers to the value of beauty produced through the exploration of sounds, meanings, and patterns in language. Crystal (1998) posits that language games provide high aesthetic value, such as those that can be found in literary works, poetry, or art performances, which serve to enrich the artistic dimension of language. Through this technique, the reader or listener can experience an immersive interpretation experience, where the beauty of sound and word structure is at the core of the humor or message conveyed.

An example is the play on words "Why are bald people always happy? Because they are always shaving." Here, the pun from the word "grateful" to "screaming" creates aesthetic value through the uniqueness of unusual sounds, where a deep meaning of happiness and self-acceptance is conveyed through lighthearted and comforting humor. In this way, humor not only invites laughter but also educates the reader to see physical flaws as something that can be accepted open-mindedly, resulting in an effect that is both educational and reflective.

Likewise with the example "What dance do bank customers often do? Cash Department." This sound game relies on the similarities between "cash pull" and "cash dance," resulting in a hilarious effect that focuses only on the beauty of sound combined with absurd associations. There is no social message or moral value in this, but rather the main goal is to entertain through fun and funny phonetic play.

Next, the example of "*Pocong* is short? *Pocong* hair" also shows a strong aesthetic function. The pun between the word "cut" that turns into "pocong" produces a funny phonetic surprise, with no meaning beyond the cuteness of the sound. Although it does not carry a moral message, this humorous effect is purely derived from the unexpected beauty of shapes and sounds, which enrich the linguistic experience.

Likewise with the example "What chili sauce is usually on the side of the road? Sambal ban." This phonetic pun combines two things that are not directly related (food and vehicle repairs) in a very witty way. The play of sounds between "sambal" and "tambal" produces a cuteness that focuses only on phonetic and visual aesthetics, which conveys the impression of humor without deeper meaning. At the end of the day, "What do you think of the teletubbies?" "Telatabis" is a classic example of a phonetic game that makes use of similarities in sounds to produce entertaining humor. In this case, Teletubbies' phonetic change to "telatabis" is not only funny, but also displays beauty in the transformation of sounds that invite laughter without the need to deepen the meaning.

Interpersonal Functions

Interpersonal function in language play refers to its ability to build and maintain social relationships between individuals through the use of humor, mutual understanding, and togetherness in conversation. According to Norrick (1993), it also functions as a tool to show mutual understanding, create familiarity, and affirm solidarity in a social group. Its use in everyday interactions often serves as a signal of familiarity, allowing communication participants to show openness, closeness, and mutual respect.

An example is the play on words "What animals turn out to be brothers? Frogs are brothers." This play creates a relaxed and informal atmosphere in conversation, sparking laughter through the use of light humor. The effect is to strengthen the social relationship between the speaker and the listener, by adding an element of familiarity to everyday interactions. Humor like this can break the ice and invite a smile without creating tension, making it an effective tool for building closeness.

In addition, the example "What leaves can't fall off? Earlobes" also accentuate interpersonal functions. Even this, which focuses on the literal play of the word "leaf," not only invites laughter but also serves to dilute the atmosphere and build closeness between the speaker

and the listener. Because the game is lightweight and easy to understand, it brings social groups together in a fun and non-intimidating way.

The same goes for "What soap smells? Your shit is farts." This is an example of coarse humor or toilet humor that is specifically aimed at strengthening social relationships in informal groups. Although not thematically profound, this humor relies on situational and expressive humor, which invites spontaneous laughter. By expressing something simple yet familiar, the game strengthens the social bond between friends or groups of talkers.

Another example, "What suit keeps you warm? Jas be mine," uses romantic humor to create intimacy and personal connection. The "be mine" pun on romanticism shows how it can also create emotional closeness in conversation. Humor like this can strengthen personal bonds through lighthearted and entertaining expressions of affection. Finally, "Eh Saleh, are my clothes ready? Eh ape ni, our name is Sally, S-I-L-L-Y," is an example of a play on words that arises from a misunderstanding of names that actually creates cuteness in conversation. The use of humor in the form of dialogue shows how it can create familiarity in communication, making the conversation feel more relaxed and together.

Cognitive Function

Cognitive function in language play plays a role in stimulating the listener's critical thinking and metalinguistic skills. According to Bell (2009) and Nurweni (2018), it also relies on ambiguity and polysemia, which forces listeners to deconstruct meaning creatively and analytically. This process sparks the listener's imagination and analytical skills, while engaging them in a deeper understanding of the structure and meaning of language. Therefore, it can also be an effective tool in stimulating critical thinking and creativity in understanding language.

Example of a word game "What is the Japanese language I was pickpocketed? Sakukurata Takkurasa" tests listeners' understanding through phonetic processing that leads to a play on meaning. Listeners need to recognize that this phrase is not a Japanese word, but rather a phonetic disguise of an Indonesian sentence. Humor arises when listeners realize that they are being asked to decrypt voices, which require associative and metalinguistic thinking skills.

Next, "What tent likes kepo? Tents tanya" encourages listeners to decompose sounds and understand the relationship between question marks and question marks. This process triggers lateral thinking, in which the listener must think outside of conventional understanding to associate the sound of a tent with the meaning of "ask." Therefore, it also serves as an exercise for creative thinking and solving phonetic associations.

Another example is "What kindergarten is confusing? Kindergarten-Riddle crossing." This also brings together the two meanings of the abbreviation "TK" (Kindergarten and Crossword Puzzle), which requires the listener to think and analyze the hidden meaning behind the word. Logic processing is necessary to understand the relationship between abbreviations and confusing contexts, thus revealing the cognitive function in stimulating critical thinking.

Likewise, "What animal walks slowly? Sheep, because if you are fast, you will be in a hurry." Even this relies on the counterposition between the meaning of the words "sheep" (slow) and "hurry" (fast). The listener is asked to think logically about indirect phonetic and semantic relationships. The funny effect comes after a thought process that links these two meanings, so that it also serves as a stimulant for creative and analytical thinking.

Example "What is a cute soldier? The flea soldier" makes use of phonetic decomposition to change the meaning of the word "ally" to "flea," which requires logical thought processes and phonetic associations. This understanding involves the process of decomposition of words and matching the right meaning, making this also a tool to train the listener's critical and cognitive thinking skills.

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Ideological Function

The ideological function in language games plays a role as a tool to convey political, social, and cultural views implicitly, through ambiguity and the play of meaning. According to

Dynel (2009) and Wibowo (2020), it also allows speakers to express certain criticisms or ideologies in a subtle and safe way, especially in societies that limit freedom of expression directly. In this context, it also becomes a strategic communication tool in critical discourse and social resistance, because it can convey ideological messages in an indirect and still entertaining way (Nababan, 2019).

The first example is "What fish apostatized? Fish mjua-aer." It also uses the word "muj aer" which is cut into "muj-aer," then associated with the word "apostasy," a term that has strong religious connotations. Even though it is conveyed with humor, it also touches on the theme of faith and faith change. In this way, it not only invites laughter, but also communicates more serious social issues regarding ideological or religious changes, subtly and indirectly (Pratama, 2024).

The second example, "What fan are girls waiting for? Certainty to apply." This also takes advantage of the pun from the word "certainty" to "certainty," which touches on the social theme of women's expectations of commitment in relationships. While funny, it also indirectly reflects the general social view of gender roles and marriage expectations. The ideological function in this is also to voice social norms regarding women's relationships and expectations for a clearer commitment.

The same goes for "What oil is intoxicating? Witness your smile." This not only creates cuteness through sound plays, but also conveys emotional and romantic messages. The word "oil" disguised as "witness" implies the importance of expressions of love and longing. This ideological function lies in its ability to voice views on love and emotions, showing that ideology can be conveyed through heartfelt humor.

"What cooking utensils are good at stand up comedy? Pan Pragiwaksono." This also uses the mockery of the name of a comedian (Panji Pragiwaksono) into a pot, a cooking utensil. Although it may seem like a joke, it can be seen as a critique of the world of entertainment or comedy, describing the important role a comedian plays in shaping a culture of humor. The function of this ideology is also to show how humor can play a role in building understanding of the entertainment industry.

Finally, "What tea is bitter? Reality." Even this inserts social criticism or existential reflection through the pun on the word "reality" disguised as "reality." In a funny way, it also voices a message about life that is often bitter or not according to expectations, a form of satire on the reality of life that is sometimes difficult to accept. This ideological function also highlights the incompatibility between expectations and reality, inviting listeners to reflect on the existence and reality of life.

Overall, the ideological function of this language game allows for the delivery of profound criticism or social messages through humor, creating space for cultural, moral, and political reflection in society without having to convey the message directly.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the uniqueness of *language play* (puns) in a multilingual society by identifying pun types, linguistic techniques, and their communicative functions. Analysis of over 100 samples revealed two main categories: intralingual puns within a single language (such as Indonesian, Javanese, or English) and interlingual puns involving different languages (e.g., Indonesian with English or Korean). The multilingual context fosters creativity by

blending sound and meaning elements across languages, with interlingual homophonic puns being the most dominant. The study identified four key linguistic techniques—homophonic, paronymy, polysemous, and morphological—with homophony, based on sound similarity, being the most prevalent, especially in interlingual puns. These puns fulfill multiple communicative functions, including aesthetic (enhancing language beauty), interpersonal (strengthening social bonds), cognitive (stimulating reasoning), didactic (conveying moral values), and ideological (expressing social criticism on moral, economic, or political issues), demonstrating their role beyond entertainment as multifunctional tools shaping interaction, thought, and ideology. Future research could investigate how these *language games* influence identity formation and social dynamics in other multilingual digital spaces beyond social media platforms.

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