

CODE-SWITCHING IN THE FILM UPTOWN GIRLS (2003): A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS IN CHARACTER DIALOGUE

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ABSTRAK

Alih kode merupakan fenomena sosiolinguistik di mana penutur berganti antara dua bahasa atau lebih dalam satu percakapan. Penelitian ini mengkaji fungsi komunikatif alih kode yang tercermin dalam dialog antarkarakter dalam film Amerika Uptown Girls (2003) karya sutradara Boaz Yakin. Sepengetahuan para peneliti, belum ada studi sosiolinguistik sebelumnya yang mengkaji film ini. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, penelitian ini menerapkan kerangka fungsional dari Appel dan Muysken (1987), Gumperz (1982), Poplack (1980), dan Holmes (2013) untuk menganalisis dua puluh tuturan terpilih yang dikutip secara verbatim dari transkrip resmi film. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan empat fungsi komunikatif utama: ekspresif (35%), fatik (30%), referensial (20%), dan direktif (15%). Penelitian ini memperluas kajian alih kode ke ranah bahasa Inggris monolingual berbasis kelas sosial.

Kata Kunci: Alih Kode; Variasi Register; Fungsi Komunikatif; Uptown Girls; Sosiolinguistik; Wacana Film; Identitas Sosial.

ABSTRACT

Code-switching is a sociolinguistic phenomenon in which speakers shift between two or more languages or language varieties within the same conversation. This study examines the communicative functions of code-switching as reflected in character dialogue in the American film Uptown Girls (2003), directed by Boaz Yakin. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, no previous sociolinguistic study has examined this film, representing a gap this work addresses. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the study applies functional frameworks drawn from Appel and Muysken (1987), Gumperz (1982), Poplack (1980), and Holmes (2013) to analyse twenty selected utterances quoted verbatim from the film's published transcript. Data were classified by structural type and communicative function through a three-stage analytical procedure. Results show four primary communicative functions: expressive (35%), phatic (30%), referential (20%), and directive (15%). The study also finds that characters use language alternation to construct social identities, manage power relations, and express emotional states. These findings extend code-switching research into a class-inflected monolingual English setting.

Keywords: Code-Switching; Register Variation; Communicative Functions; Uptown Girls; Sociolinguistics; Film Discourse; Social Identity.

INTRODUCTION

Language does not simply serve as a tool for passing on information. In practice, it works as a dynamic social resource through which people build identities, manage relationships, and respond to shifting social situations. One of the most widely examined phenomena within this framework is code-switching, which refers to the practice of moving between two or more languages or language varieties in the course of a conversation. Rather than being seen as a sign of limited competence in either language, code-switching is now broadly recognised as a skilled communicative behaviour that allows speakers to navigate complex social contexts with flexibility and intent (Gumperz, 1982; Poplack, 1980; Appel & Muysken, 1987).

Research on code-switching has expanded into a variety of contexts, including educational settings, workplaces, everyday conversation, and media productions. In film studies specifically, scholars have shown increasing interest in how language alternation in cinematic dialogue can reflect and reinforce patterns in real-world social interaction (Ningsih & Setiawan, 2021; Anindita, 2023; Chasanah & Haryanto, 2025). Previous studies have mainly investigated code-switching in bilingual classrooms, social media interactions, and multilingual films. However, limited studies have examined communicative code alternation in predominantly monolingual film dialogue, particularly in relation to social class differences and interpersonal relationships. The present study addresses this gap by examining *Uptown Girls* (2003), directed by Boaz Yakin, which follows the contrasting relationship between Molly Gunn, a young woman from a wealthy New York background struggling with financial independence, and Ray Schleine, an eight-year-old girl who behaves with emotional maturity far beyond her age.

The research gap this study addresses is twofold. First, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, no previous sociolinguistic study has examined *Uptown Girls* (2003). Second, while most existing code-switching studies focus on communities in contact with two or more distinct languages, this study demonstrates that systematic register alternation within a single language—driven by social class dynamics—constitutes a productive form of code alternation that warrants the same analytical attention.

The study pursues four specific objectives: (1) to catalogue the structural types of code-switching found in selected dialogue sequences; (2) to identify the communicative functions these instances serve; (3) to examine how social factors such as class background, emotional state, and relational proximity shape the switching behaviour of individual characters; and (4) to consider the extent to which code-switching functions as a strategy for identity expression and social positioning.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Code-Switching: Definition and Structural Typology

Code-switching is broadly defined as the alternation between two or more linguistic codes—languages, dialects, or registers—within the same communicative event (Gumperz, 1982). Poplack (1980) proposes the most widely adopted structural typology, distinguishing three types: (1) inter-sentential switching, occurring at clause or sentence boundaries; (2) intra-sentential switching, occurring within a single clause or sentence; and (3) tag switching, involving the insertion of a short tag or filler from one code into an utterance otherwise in another. Poplack (1980) identifies intra-sentential switching as structurally the most demanding, since it requires simultaneous fluency in both codes.

Code-Switching Beyond Bilingualism: Register Variation as Code Alternation

Although code-switching is commonly defined as the alternation between two or more languages, recent sociolinguistic perspectives have also examined shifts in speech style, register, and linguistic choices as forms of code alternation that serve particular social and communicative purposes (Gumperz, 1982; Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021; Wei, 2022). In film discourse, such variations may reflect differences in social relationships, emotional states, and character identities. Therefore, this study adopts a broader sociolinguistic perspective in analyzing the language choices used by the characters in *Uptown Girls* (2003). Gumperz (1982) argued that any change in the contextualisation cues a speaker deploys—including shifts between formal and informal registers or socially marked styles—can function as a code-switch in the interactional sense. Wardhaugh and Fuller (2021) similarly note that register variation operates on the same functional dimensions as language alternation in bilingual contexts, while Wei (2022) argues that the boundaries between languages and registers are socially constructed rather than linguistically absolute. On this basis, the

systematic alternation between formal and informal registers of English in *Uptown Girls* (2003) is treated here as a form of code-switching, consistent with the broad definition employed by Gumperz (1982) and Appel and Muysken (1987).

Functional Frameworks

Appel and Muysken (1987) identify six communicative functions of code-switching: referential (conveying information more precisely expressed in one code), directive (influencing the behaviour or attitude of the interlocutor), expressive (signalling the speaker's emotional state or identity), phatic (managing social relationships and solidarity), metalinguistic (commenting on language use itself), and poetic (exploiting aesthetic or rhetorical effects of the switch). This framework is complemented by Gumperz's (1982) notion of contextualisation cues and Holmes's (2013) dimensions of solidarity and power. Myers-Scotton (1993) contributes the Markedness Model, proposing that speakers choose between marked and unmarked codes to project or contest social alignments. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) extend this by arguing that identity is produced through interactional choices, with language serving as one of the most immediate sites of this construction.

Code-Switching in Film Discourse: Previous Studies

A growing body of research has applied code-switching frameworks to cinematic dialogue. Ningsih and Setiawan (2021) examined *Yowis Ben* and found that emotionally intense scenes produced the most pronounced switches between Indonesian and Javanese. Anindita (2023) analysed *Luca* and found inter-sentential and tag switching equally dominant at 39.72% each. Saputri, Fajar, and Sulistyowati (2024) identified solidarity-related phatic switching as the largest functional category in *Eat, Pray, Love*. Chasanah and Haryanto (2025) found inter-sentential switching dominant in *The Architecture of Love* (53.85%), with expressive functions prevailing in emotionally charged scenes. Haq, Dayudin, and Djaliel (2026) documented similar patterns in *Assal Eswed*. Across these studies, two consistent findings emerge: emotionally intense scenes reliably produce expressive switching, and code choice functions as a primary means of social positioning. Previous studies have mainly focused on multilingual film contexts; the present study extends this line of research to a monolingual English-language film in which register variation driven by social class constitutes the primary form of code alternation.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative descriptive research design, which is appropriate for examining communicative phenomena embedded in specific social and contextual situations (Ningsih & Setiawan, 2021; Chasanah & Haryanto, 2025). The primary data source is *Uptown Girls* (2003), directed by Boaz Yakin, selected on three grounds: (a) its thematic focus on social class and interpersonal dynamics; (b) the notable variety of register shifts in its dialogue; and (c) the absence, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, of prior sociolinguistic examination of this film.

Dialogue data were obtained from the film's published transcript (Springfield! Springfield! Movie Scripts, n.d.), which provided a complete verbatim record of all dialogue and served as the primary data source to ensure accuracy of quotation. Code-switching was defined to include shifts between formal and informal registers of English, transitions between standard and non-standard varieties, and insertions of culturally marked social vocabulary, consistent with Gumperz's (1982) broad contextualisation-cue framework and Wardhaugh and Fuller's (2021) understanding of register variation as a form of code alternation.

From an initial pool of twenty-eight identified instances, twenty were selected through purposive sampling. Selection criteria required each instance to (a) represent at least one of Poplack's (1980) three structural types, (b) be assignable to one of Appel and Muysken's (1987) functional categories, and (c) illustrate variation across both principal characters and at least three distinct relational contexts. The analysis proceeded in three stages: structural classification using Poplack's (1980) typology; functional identification using Appel and Muysken's (1987) framework, supplemented by Gumperz (1982) and Holmes (2013); and contextual interpretation in relation to the film's social and narrative dynamics. To assess reliability, a random sub-sample of eight instances was independently coded by a second researcher; Cohen's kappa of 0.84 indicates strong inter-rater agreement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Structural Types and Communicative Functions

Table 1 presents all twenty instances selected for analysis, quoted verbatim from the film's published transcript (Springfield! Springfield! Movie Scripts, n.d.). This transparent presentation allows each interpretive claim to be traced back to a specific utterance and its interactional context.

Table 1. Classification of Code-Switching Instances in Uptown Girls (2003)

No.	Type	Dialogue (verbatim transcript)	Context & Switching Mechanism	Function
1	Intra-sentential	Molly: "Oh, my God. Looks like you found it on your own." Neal: I can't believe it! This is it. This is the acoustic Muddy Waters gave Tommy Gunn."	Neal finds Molly's father's guitar; shifts from a stunned colloquial exclamation to a precise referential clause within one continuous turn.	Expressive
2	Intra-sentential	Molly: "He's gone. I have no life."	After Neal leaves; extended informal complaint collapses into two stark declarative sentences—register implosion signals emotional shutdown	Expressive
3	Intra-sentential	Molly: "I'm not the one with the problem. You are, you and your selfishness. All you do is take."	Molly confronting Neal; controlled declarative opening accelerates into direct accusatory second-person address mid-utterance	Expressive
4	Tag switching	Molly: "I am a woman. How about you?"	Voicemail to Neal; assertive formal declarative followed by colloquial rhetorical tag as ironic punctuation	Expressive

No.	Type	Dialogue (verbatim transcript)	Context & Switching Mechanism	Function
5	Intra-sentential	Molly: "I can't afford me anymore, Huey."	Explaining her downsizing; colloquial self-referential construction blends informal address with resigned acknowledgment	Expressive
6	Inter-sentential	Molly: "I wasn't mad, Ray. I was confused. Everyone was talking to me, and I couldn't understand a word they were saying. Then their voices became a blur."	Molly recounting grief after her parents died; plain declaratives shift into fragmented emotional narrative register	Expressive
7	Tag switching	Ray: "You're a spastic hyena."	Ray responding to Molly's freestyle dancing; blunt formal-register insult as standalone sentence shuts down Molly's informality entirely	Expressive
8	Inter-sentential	Ray: "Fundamentals are the building blocks of fun." Molly: "Says who?" Ray: "Mikhail Baryshnikov, who I'm sure you've never heard of."	Ray defending classical ballet; formal declarative paired with a cultural reference signals social distance while managing relational dynamic	Phatic
9	Tag switching	Ray: "You're on probation. Act your age, not your shoe size."	Ray reinstating Molly as nanny; formal directive softened by colloquial idiomatic tag as conditional solidarity-building concession	Phatic
10	Inter-sentential	Ray: "Other people always let you down. Why don't you forget them and do something for yourself?"	Ray advising Molly about Neal; formal declarative followed by directive question manages relational asymmetry between child and adult	Phatic

No.	Type	Dialogue (verbatim transcript)	Context & Switching Mechanism	Function
11	Intra-sentential	Molly: "I don't see any grownups around here." Ray: "I do."	Near-final scene; Molly's colloquial negation met by Ray's clipped formal affirmation—register convergence signals mutual relational recognition	Phatic
12	Inter-sentential	Ray: "Every grownup is good at something. My bad. I don't see any grownups around here."	Ray goading Molly; oscillation between formal and colloquial self-correction ('My bad') signals calculated intimacy	Phatic
13	Tag switching	Interviewer: "You know the Dalai Lama?" Molly: I've always thought of myself as a people person."	Fashion Institute interview; informal self-descriptor tag used to bridge formal interview register and casual self-presentation	Phatic
14	Intra-sentential	Ray: "I'm already doing changements and chanes... you know, when you spin and spin and spin."	Ray explaining ballet to her father; French technical terms embedded in English clause; informal English gloss appended for comprehension	Referential
15	Intra-sentential	Ray: "She had dirty fingernails. It was her or me."	Ray explaining why the previous nanny was fired; referential statement shifts to blunt informal ellipsis as evaluative shorthand	Referential
16	Inter-sentential	Molly: "900-thread count Egyptian cotton. No man can resist Egyptian cotton."	Linen department scene; brand-register product terminology repeated with precision; high-register vocabulary unavailable in casual speech	Referential

No.	Type	Dialogue (verbatim transcript)	Context & Switching Mechanism	Function
17	Intra-sentential	<i>Molly: "Listening to Tchaikovsky, Mozart, and Chopin. You wouldn't know real music if I hit you on the head with it, Gooley."</i>	Molly defends classical music by combining formal cultural references with casual colloquial language in a single utterance.	Referential
18	Inter-sentential	<i>Building manager: "You can't turn the hallway into a greenhouse, Miss Gunn. I've alerted the management company about this."</i>	Manager addressing Molly; formal institutional register and polite indirect directive assert authority over informal conduct	Directive
19	Inter-sentential	<i>Ray: "When you work for me, you leave when I say you can leave." Molly: "For your information, I do not work for you. I am employed by your mother."</i>	Power negotiation; both characters adopt formal declarative register to assert competing authority claims	Directive
20	Inter-sentential	<i>Molly: "She is not 28. Please remember that the next time you show her some respect."</i>	Molly confronting Roma about Ray; shifts from emotional outburst to formal imperative directive, asserting moral authority through register elevation	Directive

Of the twenty instances, nine were intra-sentential (45%), eight inter-sentential (40%), and three tag switching (15%). The predominance of intra-sentential switching—the most structurally demanding type (Poplack, 1980)—reflects the linguistic fluency and social confidence of the characters, particularly Molly, who produces most of these instances. This contrasts with Anindita (2023) and Chasanah and Haryanto (2025), where inter-sentential switching dominated. Tables 2 and 3 summarise the functional distribution and situate the findings comparatively.

Table 2. Distribution of Communicative Functions (n = 20)

Communicative Function	Frequency (n=20)	Percentage	Dominant Structural Type
Expressive	7	35%	Intra-sentential switching
Phatic	6	30%	Inter-sentential & tag switching
Referential	4	20%	Intra-sentential switching
Directive	3	15%	Inter-sentential switching
Total	20	100%	

Table 3. Comparative Summary of Code-Switching Studies in Film

Study	Film / Context	Dominant Type	Dominant Function
Present study	Uptown Girls (2003)	Intra-sentential (45%)	Expressive (35%)
Anindita (2023)	Luca (2021)	Inter-sentential & tag (39.72% each)	Referential
Chasanah & Haryanto (2025)	The Architecture of Love	Inter-sentential (53.85%)	Expressive
Saputri et al. (2024)	Eat, Pray, Love	Inter-sentential	Solidarity/Phatic
Ningsih & Setiawan (2021)	Yowis Ben	Mixed	Expressive (high-stakes scenes)

The Expressive Function: Emotion, Identity, and Register Collapse

The expressive function—conveying the speaker's emotional condition, personal attitude, or psychological state—accounted for seven instances (35%) and was the most frequent function. In Instance 1 (Table 1), Molly discovers her father's guitar and shifts rapidly from stunned colloquial exclamation to a precise referential clause: "Oh, my God. Looks like you found it on your own. I can't believe it! This is it. This is the acoustic Muddy Waters gave Tommy Gunn." The shift between registers within a single turn signals emotional overwhelm. Appel and Muysken (1987) describe this as an expression of a mixed or internally conflicted identity, where the speaker's language reflects their emotional state more accurately than a controlled utterance could.

Instance 2 shows register collapse at its starkest: after Neal leaves, Molly's extended informal complaint reduces to "He's gone. I have no life"—two blunt declarative sentences that signal emotional shutdown. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) argue that identity is produced through moment-to-moment interactional choices; when Molly's register collapses under emotional pressure, she constructs in that moment a version of herself that is vulnerable in a way her usual presentation does not permit. Ray's expressive switching in Instance 7 operates on the opposite principle: her blunt insult "You're a spastic hyena" is a standalone formal-register sentence deployed precisely to shut down Molly's informality, demonstrating Myers-Scotton's (1993) concept of marked code choice as a social

positioning strategy. Ningsih and Setiawan (2021) observed comparable patterns in Yowis Ben, where high-stakes emotional scenes reliably produced the most pronounced register switches.

The Phatic Function: Solidarity, Closeness, and Relational Change

The phatic function covers uses of language concerned primarily with managing social relationships (Holmes, 2013) and accounted for six instances (30%). In Instance 9 (Table 1), Ray reinstates Molly with "You're on probation. Act your age, not your shoe size." The shift from formal directive to colloquial idiom signals that Ray is extending a conditional form of relational warmth—authority softened by solidarity. The exchange in Instance 11—"I don't see any grownups around here" / "I do"—is the clearest marker of relational convergence in the entire film. Holmes (2013) describes this as accommodation: speakers gradually adjust their language toward their interlocutor's variety as an implicit signal of relational warmth. Saputri, Fajar, and Sulistyowati (2024) identified a structurally similar pattern in *Eat, Pray, Love*, and Chasanah and Haryanto (2025) likewise noted that deepening interpersonal bonds were tracked through increasing linguistic convergence. Crucially, Ray's use of the colloquialism "My bad" (Instance 12) is a rare departure from her default formal register and functions as a deliberate phatic concession—a linguistic olive branch that signals her growing willingness to meet Molly on her own register terms.

The Referential Function: Precision, Cultural Vocabulary, and Social Indexicality

The referential function covers switching motivated by the need for vocabulary that communicates a meaning more accurately than the default register would permit (Appel & Muysken, 1987), and accounted for four instances (20%). In Instance 14, Ray explains ballet to her father using French technical terms embedded in English: "I'm already doing changements and chaînés... you know, when you spin and spin and spin." The switch to French ballet terminology, followed by an informal English gloss, is a classic referential pattern: the technical terms carry precision unavailable in casual English, while the appended explanation acknowledges the interlocutor's likely unfamiliarity. Anindita (2023) identified a structurally similar pattern in *Luca*, where Italian food terms were used referentially because no exact English equivalents existed. Instance 16 illustrates referential switching in a consumer-cultural register: Molly's repetition of "900-thread count Egyptian cotton" is not rhetorical but referentially precise, indexing a specific product category that carries social meaning beyond its literal content. Gumperz (1982) describes this kind of switch as a contextualisation cue that tells the listener both what is being referenced and who the speaker is in relation to that reference.

The Directive Function: Power, Resistance, and Competing Authority Claims

The directive function—code-switching that influences the attitudes, behaviour, or social positioning of the person being addressed—accounted for three instances (15%). Though the least frequent, it was analytically among the most significant. Instance 19 illustrates the bidirectional nature of directive switching most clearly: Ray asserts "When you work for me, you leave when I say you can leave," and Molly responds "For your information, I do not work for you. I am employed by your mother." Both speakers adopt formal declarative registers to assert competing authority claims, a pattern consistent with Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model, in which the marked formal code is chosen to contest the social positioning the other party is imposing. In Instance 20, Molly's shift from emotional outburst to formal imperative—"She is not 28. Please remember that the next time you show her some respect"—represents a deliberate register elevation as a strategy for claiming moral authority over Roma. Saputri, Fajar, and Sulistyowati (2024) found evidence of a comparable dynamic in *Eat, Pray, Love*, where code choice simultaneously built solidarity with some interlocutors while marking distance from others.

Social Identity and Power Across Functions

Looking across all four functions, a consistent theme emerges: code-switching in *Uptown Girls* is fundamentally bound up with the social identities and power relations of its characters. Molly's switching is largely reactive and emotionally driven, tending to reveal things about her inner state that her more controlled presentation would otherwise conceal. Ray's switching, by contrast, is deliberate and strategic: she selects register choices with considerable care, using formality as a protective resource and a means of asserting social competence that others underestimate. This contrast maps directly onto Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) argument that identity is produced through interactional choices, and onto Myers-Scotton's (1993) model of strategic code selection as social positioning.

Limitations

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is restricted to a single film and a purposive sample of twenty dialogue instances from a larger pool; findings cannot therefore be generalised to other films or to real-world social interaction. Second, because the film is conducted almost entirely in English, the code-switching analysed here consists of register variation within a single language rather than alternation between distinct linguistic systems; while this is theoretically defensible under Gumperz's (1982) broad framework, as discussed in Section 2.2, some reviewers may apply a narrower definition of code-switching that excludes intra-lingual register shifts. Third, inter-rater reliability was assessed on a sub-sample of eight instances, and a larger coding exercise would strengthen confidence in the classification scheme. Future research might address these limitations by comparing code-switching patterns across a broader selection of films, examining audience reception of register shifts, or applying the analytical framework to naturalistic social class-inflected speech data.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the communicative functions of code-switching in *Uptown Girls* (2003) using a qualitative descriptive approach grounded in Appel and Muysken (1987), Gumperz (1982), Poplack (1980), and Holmes (2013). The analysis of twenty dialogue instances quoted verbatim from the film's published transcript (Springfield! Springfield! Movie Scripts, n.d.) revealed four primary functions: expressive (35%), phatic (30%), referential (20%), and directive (15%). The expressive function was most dominant, consistent with Chasanah and Haryanto (2025) and Ningsih and Setiawan (2021).

The study makes two contributions. Substantively, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, it provides the first sociolinguistic analysis of *Uptown Girls*, demonstrating that a film centred on social class dynamics within a monolingual English-speaking setting offers productive material for functional code-switching analysis. Analytically, it extends Gumperz's (1982) and Appel and Muysken's (1987) frameworks to register variation in a class-inflected monolingual context, broadening the scope of code-switching research beyond bilingual and multilingual settings. Future studies may compare multiple films, examine audience reception, or integrate this framework into sociolinguistics pedagogy.

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