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Agentivity and Experiencer Alignment in Bengali–English Complex Predicates: A Constraint-Based Analysis of Light Verb Selection

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ABSTRACT

Due to enhanced exposure to English in urban Bangladesh, Bengali– English code- mixing is on the rise and complex predicates abound where an English lexical unit is merged with a Bengali light verb (ignore kora, feel hocche). While studies have focused on the sociolinguistic motivations of such preferences, little is known about semantic and structural properties of light verbs that may be responsible for the choices. The present paper explores the possibility that choices between available Bengali light verbs are constrained by two factors: Agentivity Preservation and Experiencer Alignment. An Acceptability Judgment Task was administered to 161 Bengali– English bilinguals who evaluated the naturalness of item pairs that differed in the incorporated light verb. Paired-samples t-tests on the obtained ratings demonstrated that for each verb, the differences between constructions were statistically significant. Agentive verbs (ignore, discuss) triggered significantly stronger preferences for agentive constructions (kora) compared to experiencer constructions (howa/laga). In contrast, telic verbs (feel, bore) showed stronger tendencies for experiencer constructions over agentive ones. Verbs with mixed or less clear meanings (cancel, relax) did not exhibit strong preferences. Thus, the patterns support a constraint-based approach to code-switched constructions in which semantic characteristics of the embedded verb interact with available constructions in the target language. At the same time, the findings are based on acceptability judgments of constructions and do not demonstrate the presence of specific cognitive mechanisms. Further studies are needed to explore alternative approaches, including frequency-based accounts.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary urban Bangladesh, Bengali–English code-mixing has become a widespread and socially unmarked feature of everyday communication. One of the most productive structural patterns in this mixed variety involves the formation of complex predicates, in which an English lexical item combines with a Bengali light verb, as in confirm kora ("to confirm") or feel hocche ("feeling is happening").

In such constructions, the English element contributes lexical meaning, while the Bengali light verb provides grammatical information such as tense, aspect, and argument structure. Previous research has described the structural properties of these constructions and has often analyzed them within frameworks such as the Matrix Language Frame, which accounts for the distribution of morphemes across languages. While these approaches successfully explain why Bengali light verbs appear in such constructions, they offer less insight into how speakers select between alternative light verbs.

A central empirical observation is that bilingual speakers do not use Bengali light verbs randomly in code-mixed predicates. Instead, there are consistent preferences for particular combinations. For example, speakers tend to prefer ignore kora over ignore howa, while the reverse tendency is often observed for expressions such as feel, where forms like feel hocche are more acceptable than feel kora.

This variation raises an important question: what determines the choice of light verb in Bengali–English complex predicates? Structural accounts alone cannot fully explain these patterns, as both constructions are grammatically possible. This suggests that additional factors potentially semantic or usage-based play a role in shaping speakers' preferences.

Although Bengali–English code-mixing has been widely studied, most existing work has focused on sociolinguistic motivations (e.g., identity, prestige, or lexical need) or on structural constraints governing code-switching. Comparatively less attention has been given to systematic semantic factors that may influence variation within established structural patterns.

In particular, there is limited empirical work examining whether the semantic properties of English verbs such as their degree of agentivity or their association with internal experience affect how they are integrated into Bengali light verb constructions. As a result, it remains unclear whether observed patterns of variation reflect semantic alignment, frequency effects, or other usage-based processes.

The present study addresses this gap by proposing a constraint-based account of light verb selection in Bengali–English complex predicates. The central assumption is that speakers' preferences are shaped by the interaction of two competing tendencies:

- The preservation of agentive structure associated

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with certain verbs, and

• the alignment with experiencer-based constructions available in Bengali Rather than making direct claims about underlying cognitive processes, this study treats these tendencies as testable hypotheses about observable patterns in acceptability judgments.To evaluate this proposal, the study investigates the following research questions:

• **RQ1:** Do verbs associated with volitional action show a preference for agentive (kora) constructions over experiencer (howa) constructions?

• **RQ2:** Do verbs associated with internal states show a preference for experiencer constructions over agentive constructions?

• **RQ3:** Do verbs with ambiguous or resultative meanings show no strong preference between the two constructions?

Based on these questions, the following hypotheses are formulated:

• **H1 (Agentivity Preference):** Verbs with high agentivity will be rated higher in kora constructions than in howa constructions.

• **H2 (Experiencer Preference):** Verbs associated with internal states will be rated higher in howa/laga constructions than in kora constructions.

• **H3 (Variation):** Verbs with ambiguous or resultative meanings will not show a statistically significant difference between constructions.

To test these hypotheses, the study employs an Acceptability Judgment Task (AJT) with 161 Bengali–English bilingual participants. Participants rated paired sentences differing only in light verb choice. Statistical comparisons of mean ratings were used to identify systematic preferences across verb types.

This study contributes to the literature in two main ways. First, it provides quantitative evidence for systematic variation in Bengali–English complex predicates. Second, it offers a testable semantic account of light verb selection, while acknowledging that alternative explanations such as frequency and usage patterns may also play a role.

Rather than proposing a comprehensive model of bilingual cognition, the study aims to establish a clear empirical baseline for future research on the interaction between semantic properties and grammatical structure in code-mixed language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Structural Approaches to Code-Mixing

A substantial body of research on bilingual code-mixing has focused on identifying the structural constraints governing the integration of elements from different languages. One of the most influential frameworks is the Matrix Language Frame, which proposes that one language provides the grammatical frame (the "matrix language"), while elements from another language are inserted into this structure (Myers-Scotton, 1993, 2002).

Within this framework, Bengali–English complex predicates such as confirm kora can be analyzed as instances where the Bengali light verb provides the morphosyntactic structure, while the English lexical item contributes semantic content. Similar patterns have been observed in other South Asian bilingual contexts (Muysken, 2000; Auer, 1998). These approaches successfully account for the asymmetrical distribution of grammatical material across languages.

However, while structural models explain why Bengali light verbs appear in such constructions, they do not fully account for variation between alternative light verbs (e.g., kora vs. howa) when both are grammatically possible. As such, structural accounts remain limited in explaining intra-constructional variation.

Usage-Based and Frequency-Oriented Accounts

An alternative line of research emphasizes the role of usage frequency and entrenchment in shaping linguistic patterns. Usage-based approaches argue that linguistic knowledge emerges from repeated exposure, with frequently occurring forms becoming cognitively entrenched (Bybee, 2006; Ellis, 2002).

From this perspective, frequently used combinations such as ignore kora may be preferred because they are more familiar to speakers. This view is supported by research showing that bilingual speakers' production and judgment patterns are often sensitive to frequency and collocational strength (Gries, 2013).

While such accounts offer a plausible explanation for observed preferences, they also face limitations. In particular, frequency-based explanations do not easily predict systematic variation across semantic verb classes in the absence of corpus-based frequency data. Moreover, acceptability judgments may reflect more than frequency alone, especially when speakers show consistent preferences for certain constructions across contexts.

Semantic and Cognitive Approaches

A smaller but growing body of research has explored the role of semantic and cognitive factors in shaping grammatical choices. Within Cognitive Linguistics, language is viewed as a system in which meaning and structure are closely interconnected (Langacker, 1987; Croft, 2001).

Frameworks such as Construction Grammar propose that grammatical constructions are associated with particular semantic profiles, including distinctions between agentive and non-agentive events (Goldberg, 1995, 2006). Similarly, Force Dynamics highlights how events differ in terms of force interaction, including the presence or absence of an intentional agent (Talmy, 2000).

These approaches suggest that speakers may select constructions based on how well they align with the semantic properties of a given verb. However, despite their theoretical relevance, such accounts have rarely been applied systematically to Bengali–English complex predicates. As a result, the role of semantic alignment in light verb selection remains underexplored.

The Research Gap

Taken together, existing research provides important insights into the structure and usage of code-mixed constructions, but leaves a key question unresolved. Structural models explain the distribution of elements across languages, while usage-based approaches emphasize frequency and entrenchment, and cognitive frameworks highlight the potential role of semantic alignment.

However, there is limited empirical work that directly tests whether semantic properties of verbs systematically influence light verb selection in Bengali–English complex predicates. In particular, it remains unclear whether observed patterns reflect structural constraints, usage-based entrenchment, semantic alignment, or some interaction of these factors.

Positioning the Present Study

The present study addresses this gap by proposing and testing a constraint-based semantic account of light verb selection. Specifically, it examines whether variation between agentive (kora) and experiencer (howa/laga) constructions can be explained through the interaction of Agentivity Preservation and Experiencer Alignment.

By employing acceptability judgment data, the study aims to identify whether systematic patterns emerge that are consistent with semantic predictions, while acknowledging that alternative explanations such as frequency and usage-based factors may also contribute to the observed variation.

Theoretical Framework

This study proposes a cognitively informed but empirically testable model to explain light verb selection in Bengali–English complex predicates. Rather than treating code-mixing as purely structural insertion, the model assumes that bilingual speakers evaluate competing constraints from both languages when selecting a light verb. These constraints are operationalized in terms of agentivity and experiencer alignment, which can be observed through acceptability judgments.

Core Assumptions

The framework builds on insights from Construction Grammar and Force Dynamics, but limits its scope to two measurable semantic dimensions:

Agentivity

Agentivity refers to the degree to which an event involves a volitional, controlling agent. Verbs such as ignore or confirm encode high agentivity, while verbs like feel or bore encode low or non-volitional experience.

Experiencer Orientation

Experiencer orientation refers to whether an event is conceptualized as something:

- done by a subject (agentive structure), or
- happening to a subject (experiencer structure)

In Bengali, this distinction is grammatically encoded through light verbs:

- kora ("do") → [+agentive, +volitional]
- howa / laga ("happen/feel") → [–agentive, +experiencer]

A Constraint-Based Model of Light Verb Selection

We propose that light verb selection in Bengali-English complex predicates is governed by the interaction of two competing constraints:

Constraint 1: Agentivity Preservation (AP)

English verbs with strong agentive semantics tend to preserve their agentive structure, favoring kora.

Constraint 2: Experiencer Alignment (EA)

Bengali grammar favors encoding internal states and sensations through experiencer constructions, favoring howa/laga.

Model Predictions

The interaction of these constraints generates three testable outcomes:

Prediction 1: Agentivity Dominance

If a verb has high agentivity, Agentivity Preservation outweighs Experiencer Alignment.

→ Expected outcome: preference for kora

Examples tested:

- ignore kora > ignore howa
- discuss kora > discuss howa

Prediction 2: Experiencer Adaptation

If a verb encodes internal state or sensation, Experiencer Alignment outweighs Agentivity Preservation.

→ Expected outcome: preference for howa/laga

Examples tested:

- feel howa > feel kora
- bore howa > bore kora

Prediction 3: Indeterminate / Variable Zone

If a verb encodes ambiguous or resultative meaning, neither constraint clearly dominates.

→ Expected outcome: no strong preference (variation)

Examples tested:

- cancel kora ≈ cancel howa
- relax kora ≈ relax howa

Interpreting the Model

This model does not assume direct access to mental representations, but treats acceptability judgments as indirect evidence of underlying preferences. The observed patterns are therefore interpreted as reflecting probabilistic tendencies, rather than categorical rules.

Importantly, this framework does not exclude alternative explanations such as frequency or exposure. Instead, it provides a semantic account that can be tested against these competing factors in future research.

Scope of the Framework

The present model is intentionally restricted to:

- a limited set of verbs
- two semantic dimensions (agentivity and experiencer structure)
- acceptability-based evidence

As such, it should be understood as a proof-of-concept model, designed to generate testable predictions rather than to provide a complete account of Bengali-English code-mixing.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To investigate the cognitive constraints governing the formation of Bengali-English complex predicates, this study employed a quantitative cross-sectional design utilizing an Acceptability Judgment Task (AJT). The methodology was designed to measure the acceptability of competing light verb constructions (kora vs. howa) across different semantic classes of English loanwords.

Participants

A total of 161 Bengali-English bilinguals (N=161) participated in the study. The participants were recruited via digital convenience sampling targeting university students and young students in various region of Bangladesh (Dhaka, Chittagong), representing the primary demographic of "Benglish" code-mixers.

• Linguistic Profile: All participants identified Bengali as their First Language (L1) and possessed functional to advanced proficiency in English (L2), having been educated in institutions where English is a medium of instruction or a compulsory second language.

• Age Distribution: The age range of the cohort was 18–35 years (M = 23.4, SD = 4.2), ensuring the data reflects contemporary urban usage rather than archaic or formal standard Bengali.

• Exclusion Criteria: Incomplete responses or responses showing "straight-lining" behavior (selecting the same option for all questions) were excluded from the final dataset to ensure data quality.

Materials and Stimuli

The core stimuli consisted of paired code-mixed sentences designed to test the "Schema Clash" hypothesis. We selected English source verbs from three distinct semantic categories:

1. **High Agentivity Verbs:** Verbs implying volitional action (e.g., Ignore, Discuss, Confirm).
2. **Psych/Sensation Verbs:** Verbs implying internal state or experience (e.g., Feel, Bore, Confuse).
3. **Resultative/Ambiguous Verbs:** Verbs implying a change of state (e.g., Cancel, Relax).

For each English verb, two variation sets were constructed:

• Condition A (Agentive): The English verb paired with the light verb kora (to do), implying an active subject.

• **Example:**

ami	matter	-ta	ignore	korlam
1SG	matter	-DEF	ignore	do-PST.1SG

'I ignored the matter.'

• Condition B (Stative/Experiencer): The English verb paired with the light verb howa (to happen/become) or laga (to strike/feel), implying a dative or passive subject.

• **Example:**

Amar	message	-ta	ignore	holo
1SG.GEN	message	-DEF	ignore	become.PST.3

'My message was ignored.'

This design resulted in a total of 20 target sentences, randomized to prevent ordering effects and priming bias.

Instrument

The data collection instrument was a digital Acceptability Judgment Task (AJT). AJTs are the standard instrument in generative and cognitive linguistics for accessing speakers' intuitive grammatical competence (Schütze, 2016).

Participants were presented with the stimuli and asked to rate the "Naturalness" of each sentence on a 5-point Likert-type scale:

• Very Unnatural ("I would never say this")
• Unnatural ("Sounds broken/weird")
• Uncertain ("Sounds okay but slightly off")
• Natural ("I wouldn't notice if someone said it")
• Very Natural ("I use this frequently")

The instructions emphasized that participants should rely on their "gut feeling" (intuition) rather than prescriptive grammar rules.

Procedure

The survey was administered online via Google Forms to ensure wide geographical reach and anonymity.

1. Informed Consent: Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and assured of anonymity before proceeding.
2. Demographic Section: Participants provided metadata regarding their age, native district, and medium of instruction.
3. Task Execution: Participants rated the randomized sentences. The interface prevented backtracking to ensure immediate, intuitive judgments were recorded.

Data Analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted using Python (Pandas and SciPy libraries). The primary objective was

to compare participants' acceptability ratings for two competing constructions agentive (kora) and experiencer (howa/laga) across different verb types.

Acceptability ratings were collected on a 5-point Likert scale. Although Likert-scale data are ordinal in nature, they were treated as approximately interval for the purposes of parametric testing, following common practice in linguistic research. This approach allows for the use of paired-samples t-tests to compare mean ratings within participants.

For each lexical item, a paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the mean rating of the agentive construction (M_agentive) with that of the experiencer construction (M_experiencer). This within-subject design controls for inter-participant variability and allows for direct comparison of competing constructions for the same verb.

The significance threshold (alpha level) was set at $\alpha = .05$. In addition, exact p-values are reported, and conventional significance levels are indicated for descriptive purposes (*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001).

No corrections for multiple comparisons were applied, as the analysis is exploratory in nature and limited to a predefined set of lexical items. However, this should be taken into account when interpreting marginal effects.

Effect sizes were not systematically calculated in the present study; therefore, the results should be interpreted primarily in terms of direction and statistical significance rather than magnitude. Future work should incorporate effect size measures (e.g., Cohen's d) to provide a more precise estimate of the strength of observed differences.

All tests were two-tailed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this study was to examine whether participants show systematic preferences between agentive constructions (kora) and experiencer constructions (howa/laga) across different verb types. Mean ratings were compared using paired-samples t-tests for each lexical item. The alpha level was set at .05.

Importantly, this section reports statistical patterns only, while interpretation is reserved for the Discussion.

Agentive vs. Experiencer Constructions: Overall Patterns

Across the dataset, participants exhibited systematic differences in acceptability ratings between the two construction types. These differences varied depending on the semantic class of the verb, suggesting that verb type plays a role in shaping acceptability judgments.

High-Agentivity Verbs

For verbs categorized as high in agentivity (ignore, discuss, confirm), the agentive construction (kora) received higher mean ratings than the experiencer construction (howa).

- Ignore:
    - Kora (M = 4.30)
    - Howa (M = 3.61)
    - Difference significant (p < .001)
- Discuss:
    - kora (M = 4.43)
    - howa (M = 3.86)
    - Difference significant (p < .001)
- Confirm:
    - kora (M = 4.50)
    - howa (M = 4.35)
    - Difference significant (p = .006)

These results indicate a consistent preference for the agentive construction across this verb group.

Sensation / Experiencer Verbs

For verbs associated with internal states (feel, bore), the experiencer constructions (howa/laga) received higher mean ratings than the agentive construction (kora).

- Feel:
    - kora (M = 3.19)
    - howa (M = 3.40)
    - Difference significant (p = .010)
- Bore:
    - kora (M = 3.80)
    - howa (M = 4.04)
    - Difference significant (p = .004)

These results show a consistent preference for experiencer constructions within this category.

Resultative / Ambiguous Verbs

For verbs categorized as resultative or semantically ambiguous (cancel, relax), no statistically significant differences were observed between the two construction types.

- Cancel:
    - kora (M = 4.52)
    - howa (M = 4.45)
    - Not significant (p = .240)
- Relax:
    - kora (M = 4.20)
    - howa (M = 4.09)
    - Not significant (p = .200)

These findings indicate that both constructions are similarly acceptable for these verbs.

Divergent Pattern: "Convince"

The verb convince showed a pattern distinct from other high-agentivity verbs.

- Kora (M = 3.48)
- Howa (M = 3.89)
- Difference significant (p < .001)

In this case, the experiencer construction received higher ratings despite the verb's transitive semantics in English.

Summary of Findings

The results reveal three main empirical patterns:

1. A significant preference for kora with high-agentivity verbs
2. A significant preference for howa/laga with sensation verbs

3. No strong preference for resultative or ambiguous verbs

Additionally, one verb (convince) showed a pattern that differs from its semantic class.

These patterns form the basis for the interpretation presented in the following Discussion section.

Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to evaluate whether light verb selection in Bengali–English complex predicates can be explained through a constraint-based interaction between Agentivity Preservation (AP) and Experiencer Alignment (EA). The results of the acceptability judgment task provide empirical patterns that are broadly consistent with the predictions of this model, while also revealing areas where additional factors may be involved.

Evidence for Agentivity Preservation

The first prediction of the model was that verbs encoding strong volitional action would favor the agentive light verb kora. The results support this prediction.

Across items such as ignore, discuss, and confirm, participants showed a statistically significant preference for the kora construction over howa. This pattern indicates that speakers consistently favor structures in which the subject is interpreted as an intentional agent.

From a descriptive perspective, this suggests that these verbs are preferentially integrated into the Bengali system as agentive events. Within the proposed framework, this pattern is consistent with the operation of Agentivity Preservation, whereby the semantic profile of the English verb aligns with the agentive construction available in Bengali.

However, it is important to note that this interpretation remains inferential. The data demonstrate a preference for agentive constructions, but do not directly establish the cognitive mechanism underlying this preference. Alternative explanations such as higher frequency of kora-based forms in everyday usage may also contribute to this pattern.

Evidence for Experiencer Alignment

The second prediction was that verbs encoding internal states would favor experiencer-based constructions (howa/laga). The results for feel and bore are consistent with this expectation.

Participants rated constructions such as amar feel hoche higher than ami feel korchi, indicating a preference for encoding these events as states experienced by the subject, rather than actions performed by the subject.

This pattern suggests that, in these cases, speakers align the borrowed English item with an existing Bengali structure that encodes non-volitional experience. Within the model, this corresponds to the constraint of Experiencer Alignment, which favors constructions where the subject is affected rather than agentive.

Again, this interpretation should be treated cautiously. While the results are consistent with the proposed constraint, they may also reflect entrenched usage patterns in bilingual speech communities. The present data do not allow us to distinguish definitively between semantic alignment and frequency-based explanations.

Variable Patterns and the Indeterminate Zone

The third prediction concerned verbs with ambiguous or resultative meanings, where neither constraint is expected to dominate. The results for cancel and relax show no statistically significant difference between kora and howa constructions.

This lack of strong preference suggests that both constructions are acceptable to speakers, indicating a zone of variation. Within the proposed framework, this corresponds to cases where Agentivity Preservation and Experiencer Alignment exert comparable influence, resulting in no clear dominance.

Rather than invoking additional theoretical constructs, these findings can be interpreted as evidence that the system allows for flexible integration of certain verbs. At the same time, it is plausible that frequency, context, or register may play a role in shaping these preferences, which were not controlled for in the present study.

The Case of "Convince"

An unexpected result emerged for the verb convince, where participants showed a significant preference for the howa construction over kora, despite its transitive structure in English.

Within the constraint-based framework, this pattern can be interpreted as a case where Experiencer Alignment outweighs Agentivity Preservation. One possible explanation is that speakers conceptualize convince not primarily as an action performed by an agent, but as a resulting state (i.e., "being convinced").

However, this explanation remains tentative. The preference for convince howa may also be influenced by factors such as analogy with existing Bengali constructions or conventionalized usage patterns. This finding highlights a limitation of the current model: agentivity alone may not fully predict behavior for all verb types, particularly those involving resultative meanings.

Alternative Explanations and Limitations

While the constraint-based model provides a coherent account of the observed patterns, several alternative explanations must be considered.

First, frequency and entrenchment may play a significant role. Frequently used combinations such as ignore kora may be preferred simply because they are more familiar to speakers. Without corpus-based frequency data, it is not possible to determine the extent of this effect.

Second, contextual and syntactic factors were not manipulated in the present study. The absence of broader discourse context may influence how participants interpret the sentences, particularly for verbs with multiple possible readings.

Third, the use of an Acceptability Judgment Task provides

indirect evidence of linguistic preferences. While AJTs are widely used in linguistic research, they do not directly measure real-time processing or cognitive load. As such, the findings should be interpreted as reflecting patterns of acceptability, rather than direct evidence of underlying cognitive mechanisms.

Summary

Taken together, the results provide partial support for a model in which light verb selection in Bengali–English complex predicates is shaped by the interaction of Agentivity Preservation and Experiencer Alignment. The observed patterns align with the model's predictions in many cases, particularly for clearly agentive and clearly experiential verbs.

At the same time, the presence of variable patterns and unexpected results suggests that additional factors such as frequency, analogy, and contextual interpretation are also likely to play a role. The proposed framework should therefore be understood as a simplified account, which captures broad tendencies but does not fully exhaust the complexity of bilingual language use.

CONCLUSION

The present study set out to decode the underlying cognitive mechanisms that govern the formation of Bengali-English complex predicates. While previous sociolinguistic research has largely focused on the social motivations for code-mixing, this inquiry provides empirical evidence for a rigorous grammatical logic; a Cognitive Grammar of Benglish that dictates how foreign verbs are integrated into native light verb constructions.

Our analysis of 161 bilingual speakers demonstrates that the selection of a light verb (kora vs. howa) is not arbitrary but is determined by the resolution of Schema Clashes between the two languages. We identified two distinct outcomes of this cognitive negotiation. First, Schema Dominance occurs when English verbs with high agentivity (e.g., Ignore, Discuss) successfully override the Bengali preference for impersonal structures, forcing the use of the active light verb kora. Second, Schema Adaptation occurs when the Bengali cognitive map proves more resilient; English sensation verbs (e.g., Feel, Bore) are stripped of their native agentivity and coerced into the Bengali "Experiencer" frame (howa/lagche).

Furthermore, the discovery of a "Bilingual Blend" in resultative verbs (e.g., Cancel, Relax) suggests that frequent usage can erode these semantic boundaries, leading to a converged mental space where both active and passive schemas coexist without conflict.

Ultimately, this study challenges the view that code-mixing is a chaotic or purely stylistic phenomenon. Instead, it argues that "Benglish" operates under a systematic set of constraints where the Agency of the Source Language and the Experientiality of the Matrix Language constantly negotiate for dominance. These findings significantly advance our understanding of the bilingual mental lexicon, offering a predictive model for how languages restructure themselves in contact situations.

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