

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

an introduction

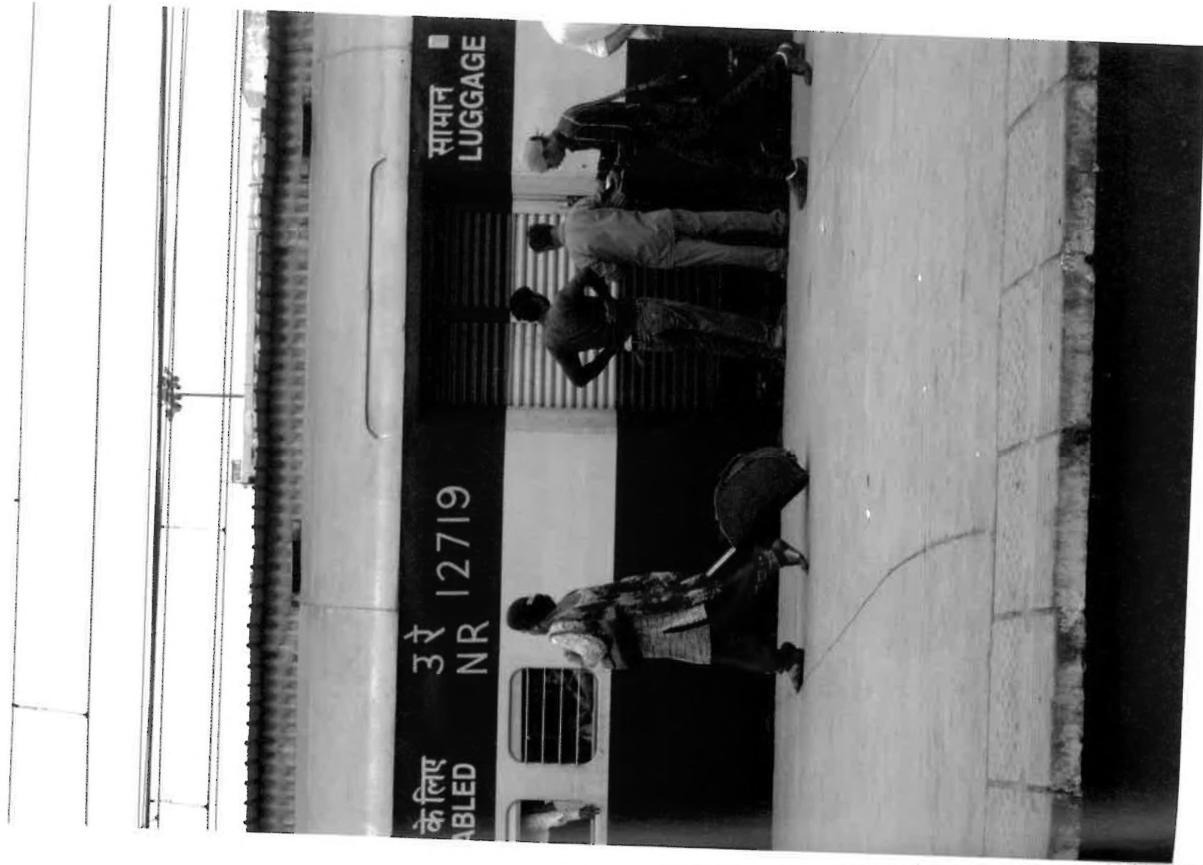
Language arguably has two purposes: to communicate and to help to establish identity. And language can help to create different kinds of identities depending on *how* you speak *what* language. Here are three different terms that explain how the way you speak says something about you, your identity, or the identity you wish to portray:

- 1 A 'sociolect' shows what social group you belong to when you speak your native language. This can include choice of words, pronunciation, and use of grammar.
- 2 A 'dialect' shows which geographical area you are from by the way you speak your native language. This can include specific vocabulary and grammar.
- 3 An 'accent' shows which geographical area you are from by the way you speak a foreign language. For example when Danish people speak English, some traits of the Danish language might shine through, and the same goes for Germans, Indians, and everyone else. This can include word order, choice of words, grammar, and pronunciation.

Furthermore, what language you speak as your mother tongue might also be a part of establishing your identity. In India, it is quite common for people to speak more than one language. Say, a couple consisting of a man from Kerala and a woman from West Bengal who met in Andhra Pradesh while studying English at the university will between them speak Malayalam, Bengali, Hindi, and English. What language will they teach their future child? Both want to teach their child their respective mother tongues, but the parents speak Hindi to each other, so that is an obvious choice as well. As they both have Master's Degrees in English Literature, English is also an obvious choice. But are four languages too much to teach a child? And if so, which of the mother tongues should the child learn and thus identify with? Such are the language dilemmas in many modern Indian homes.

As hinted here, India is a big place with many languages. Besides the two official languages (Hindi and English), there are 22 other official languages on state level such as Tamil, Telugu, Punjabi, Kannada, etc. that are considered 'official'. Furthermore, India has approximately 122 major languages and 1599 'other' languages.

The use of the word 'official' language and not 'national' language has caused quite a debate over the years in India. Many (particularly



speakers of South Indian languages) have argued that a national language cements a national identity, and South Indian people do not share the same language and culture as the North Indian people. Therefore, they do not wish to be forced to speak a different Indian language than their mother tongue. 'An official language' is used by the government for administrative purposes, and 'a national language' is used to create identity and as a national symbol. In the Indian constitution, Hindi is declared an 'official language', and each state government can declare its own official language. Be aware of this difference when you discuss language and identity.

How English is spoken in India

As mentioned, Hindi and English are the two official languages of India. And English plays a big part in, for instance, administrative communication and schools. There are also writers of both fiction and non-fiction who write only in English.

If you have ever heard an Indian speak English, you might have thought that it sounded very different than, say, American or Australian English. And there is a good reason why many Indians speak English in a certain way. There are many different sources of influence on Indian English:

- the speaker's native language will have some influence on the way he or she speaks English.
- some vowel sounds have been influenced by Scottish English because many Scots were part of the East India Company. This influence we see in the reduced vowel system where diphthongs such as /ei/ in "may" and /ou/ in "no" tend to be monophthongs in Indian English and are thus pronounced /e:/ and /o:/.
- The consonants p, t, and k are often unaspirated which means that to someone who has a Germanic mother tongue (like Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, English, and German) it sounds like Indians are saying b, d, and g, respectively.

K → G
T → D
P → B

Furthermore, many speakers of Indian English use older English words like 'bosom' instead of 'chest' or 'breast' and perhaps a Hindi way of asking for your name will be: "What is your good name?" from the Hindi sentence "āp ka shubh nām kya hai?"

Hinglish

For hundreds of years, the English language has borrowed words from Hindi, such as 'pajamas'/'pyjamas', 'jungle', 'khaki', 'shampoo', 'guru', 'yoga', 'shawl', and 'bungalow' – just to mention a few. Now, Indians also take English words and mix them with their native tongue. The mixing of English with Indian languages dates back to colonial times, but the phenomenon of 'Hinglish' has grown.

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Actually, only the words 'jungle', 'khaki', 'shampoo', 'guru', and 'bungalow' derive directly from Hindi. The words 'pyjamas' and 'shawl' came into Hindi from Persian and 'yoga' came into Hindi from Sanskrit, but they are relevant here as they came into English from Hindi.

'Hinglish' is the term for mixing Hindi and English, and it is frequently used in everyday conversation, in advertisements, and in mainstream Hindi cinema. It is used both by people who want to sound more international by mixing English in with a native Indian language, and by people who speak English as their mother tongue who wish to sound more 'native' by mixing in Hindi. We commonly see this approach being used by foreign companies that wish to seem Indian, and that cater to an Indian audience. PepsiCo is one of the companies that have done very well using Hinglish when advertising in India. The tagline "Yeh hai hai right choice, baby" meaning "It's the right choice, baby" proved to be one of the most successful in the company's history. This ad is from the 1990s, and since then many companies have followed: Domino's Pizza asks "Hungry kya?" (Are you hungry?), and one of the largest manufacturers of two-wheelers, Hero Motocorp, had the slogan: "Hum mein hai hero" (There's a hero in everyone).

But Hinglish is also used in the lives of ordinary people, young and old. For example, when young people address elders as 'auntie' or 'uncle'. The term 'auntie' "functions these days as a marker of Western sophistication among the upwardly mobile middle classes in urban and semi-urban India".²⁰ It is interesting to note, however, that you do not address young people with English words but with Hindi words like 'didi' (elder sister), 'bhaiya' (elder brother), and 'bhai sab' ('sab' from 'sahib' meaning 'sir' in Punjabi).

Advertisement for the dairy co-operative Amul – example of Hinglish. The Hindi word 'beena' means 'to pass', so the sentence means 'Forget what has passed while also meaning 'Forget you isn't got beaten'.

Jo beat gaya, usse bhool jao!



Identity and Nationalism

In 1995, the Hindu nationalist party Shiv Sena won elections in the state of Maharashtra. Wanting to rid India of its colonial past, they changed the name of Bombay to Mumbai in 1995. They ordered federal agencies, local businesses, and newspapers to adopt the change. Their argument was that they no longer wanted "the corrupt English version" of their city's name as well as the continuing references to British rule in India.

Madras became Chennai in 1996, Calcutta became Kolkata in 2001, and Bangalore became Bengaluru in 2007. These changes only happened for English speakers, as the local languages had called the cities these names already. However, the name changes send a very strong signal, proving that names and identity are tightly connected. For example, the change from Madras to Chennai "[...] was part of a similar effort by the state of Tamil Nadu to promote Tamil language and culture."²¹



Hungry Kya?™

Advertisement for Domino's Pizza - example of Hinglish. The sentence means 'Are you hungry?'