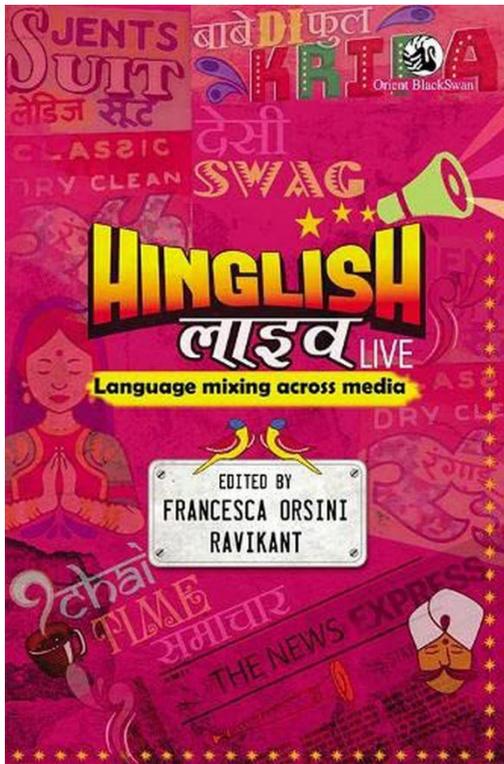


Hinglish, stirred and shaken

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The commingling of English and Hindi in a globalised world opens up spaces and undermines linguistic elitisms.

Recently Daisy Rockwell, the translator of Geetanjali Shree’s International Booker Prize-winning novel *Ret Samadhi*, asked on social media about the acceptability of the word “dude” among speakers of Hindi and other Indian languages. The overwhelming response was that “dude” was quite common among younger urban Hindi speakers. I may add that “bro” has such acceptability in many Indian languages, especially Thamizh. It seems a given that popular slang and expressions from the Anglophone world will enter various Indian languages (especially in urban areas, though not restricted to them) spoken by Indians.

This seems quite promiscuous to language puritans, especially the entry of English words where equivalents exist in the Indian language. Language mixing by Indians and the growth of Hinglish, which is the mixing of English in Hindi (though this is also used to refer to English which has Hindi words thrown in), are the subject of *Hinglish Live: Language Mixing Across Media*, edited by Francesca Orsini and Ravikant.

To make things clear, this is not the same thing as the Indianisation of English—not the mixing of words and expressions from Indian languages into the English spoken and written by us, not our lathi-charge on English to make it behave, to be governed by us. While we can and do make structural changes to English, it is in the wholesale borrowing from our languages that makes this Indian, makes the language ours.

While this may not be fully intelligible to native English speakers (or for that matter non-native but foreign English speakers), it may not be intelligible even to fellow-Indians if the English is heavily nativised by one of our numerous languages that are rooted in the various parts of our country. At the moment, Hindi mixed in English, or what we used to call Hinglish once upon a time, has more pan-Indian acceptability and intelligibility than others.

There have been numerous studies of such Indianisation of English by literary writers (think Shobhaa De, Salman Rushdie), journalists (beginning with Shobhaa De and film magazines), and ordinary speakers (think you and me). That it could not be but so—that words and concepts from Indian languages would have to enter the English written and spoken in India—would become apparent if we just thought about it for a moment.

Chutnefying English

However, Hinglish now refers to our languages (especially Hindi) after the entry of English in them. This penetration of English words and phrases into Indian languages, and the resultant Hinglish, has intrigued scholars for a while. The book *Chutnefying English: The Phenomenon of Hinglish*, edited by Rita Kothari and Rupert Snell (Penguin, 2011), resulted from a conference on the theme in January 2009.

Held in Mumbai, the capital of the Hindi film world that gave us movie titles like *Jab We Met* (2007), the conference had many participants from the media, quite a few of whom contributed to the book as well. The

contributors from the world of cinema, radio, and TV included Mahesh Bhatt, Gulzar, Nandita Das, Prasoon Joshi, Prashant Panday, Cyrus Broacha, and Kandaswamy Bharathan. Screenplay writer and academic Shuchi Kothari as well as advertising and marketing professionals like Atul Tandan, Soumik Pal, Siddharth Mishra, and Rahul Kansal were also among the contributors. I mention their names to show that professionals in the media have been aware of the impact of English on Indian languages for quite a while now, as have scholars who study the media and our various linguistic cultures.

Professor Harish Trivedi pointed attention to a ghazal written in 1887 by Ayodhya Prasad Khatri (1857-1905) to show how (even if for comic/satiric purpose) English had entered the language of some Hindi speakers:

Rent Law ka gham karen ya Bill of Income Tax ka?

Kya karen apna nahiin hai sense right now-a-days.

... Darkness chaaya hua hai Hind mein chaaro taraf

Naam ki bhi hai nahiin baaqi na light now-a-days.

How well the poet shows the impact of English during British rule—new laws, new concepts, new social realities led to this entry of the English language into Hindi and other Indian languages. The poet may have been laughing at this, even if decrying it, but this is very much a reality now, this mixing of English and Indian languages in this new globalised world of Indian economic liberalisation.

Hinglish (and the commingling of English in other Indian languages) is a result of this market space, of the new consumerism that constructs and caters to our aspirational needs. It opens up spaces, it undermines linguistic elitisms and makes the horrified gatekeepers very uncomfortable and vulnerable. Is English a predator that will destroy our languages from within, or is it like a probiotic that grows good bacteria in the gut for the well-being of our linguistic digestive systems to consume and represent this new world? Are we seeing a creolisation that is fatal to our languages or are we seeing our languages strengthening themselves, taking English in their confident embrace?

The language of advertisements

It is but natural that the language of the market would first be naturalised in the world of advertisement. Santosh Desai said in the 2009 conference that Hinglish allowed the breakdown of boundaries between the worlds of English and Hindi speakers. He saw it as reflecting and helping in the democratisation of various spaces. In this book, he has a chapter where he shows us how Hinglish entered the offices of advertisement agencies, breaking the boundaries between the English copywriter and the Hindi translator and captured the aspirational world of the new consumer. As we know, Amul butter advertisements have used interlingual puns for a very long time. And we are big at this as a people. Santosh Desai gives us a personal history of this movement towards Hinglish in advertisements and asserts that it was Pepsi that established the coolness quotient of Hinglish.

“Is English a predator that will destroy our languages from within, or is it like a probiotic that grows good bacteria in the gut for the well-being of our linguistic digestive systems to consume and represent this new world?”

This coolness of Hinglish is emphasised by other contributors to the two volumes, especially the second. It is seen as the language of the youth—thus cautioning us that we should not take Hinglish to be a language but a set of evolving/changing practices, of using words that have currency in the Indian language that people are speaking.

The first essay, by Ratnakar Tripathy, is titled “Why Hinglish is a Process not a Language”. This may be reflected in written literature—we have the example of best-selling Hinglish novels—but all that it means is that they are not written in pure Hindi and the writer makes choices to make the novel accessible to non-traditional Hindi readers (you can see this happening with the other side as well—with writers publishing novels written in English pollinated by Hindi and words from other Indian languages, not even grammatically correct at times, just to make it accessible to first-time readers).

What I liked about *Hinglish Live* is that all contributors seem aware of *Chutnefying English* and take the discussion and exploration of the phenomenon forward—they are less inclined to be judgemental (not that all contributors to the earlier book were that), and their articles focus clearly on the practice, their ears are clearly pressed to the ground. They

show what we mean when we say we are like that only but show up our linguistic jugaads in the media, in the world of publishing, in cinema (a clutch of very interesting articles focus on this), in the classroom, and in other spaces. As scholars, they attempt to theorise about this rather than just describe it but it still works for any of us interested in this phenomenon called Hinglish.

The two books together make a formidable pair—they push at our mental boundaries, force us to look at our language practice, show us how we are implicated in various hierarchical structures, and help us ask questions of ourselves. Do they give us answers? *Arre*, you want a *kunji*? Just read the books, *yaar*, *machi*, whatever!

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