

# LANGUAGE HYBRIDISATION AND GLOBAL TELEVISION: THE CASE OF HINGLISH

Daya Kishan Thussu

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## Abstract

*This article aims to explore how language can play a central role in the process of adapting global media cultures into regional and national contexts. The role of television - as the leading and most international media - is examined, focusing on the emergence of new media languages in countries such as India, one of the world's biggest media markets.*

*Language has been a key factor in the success or failure of new television channels in India, where the expansion of Western television as a result of media globalisation and availability of new technologies, namely satellite and cable television, have transformed the broadcasting landscape. The article analyses the emergence and steady growth of a new mediated language - Hinglish, a mixture of Hindi, the most widely used language in India, and English, the medium of international communication and global media.*

*The hybridisation of the national to the global culture is examined with the case study of India's private television networks - such as Zee TV. The article looks at the factors which have been responsible for hybrid television. The cultural economy of the phenomenon is explored and the question is posed - is hybrid language the future of television? If so, who benefits from programming in hybrid languages and who loses out? For centuries, language has defined national, regional or ethnic identity? Will hybridisation lead to blurring of identities? What role will the global image industry have in it?*

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## Hybrid Television

A prime example of this cultural hybridity can be found in the case of India where television networks have appropriated Western, or, more specifically, American TV

programme formats and Indianised them to suit local tastes and languages, creating a new model of hybridisation. This global-local media interaction has contributed to the emergence of Hinglish, a mixture of English and Hindi. The growing popularity of this new media language has earned the disapproval of language purists, while critical analysts view it as yet another example of the media and cultural imperialism that the West, led by the United States, exercises over the developing world. Those subscribing to a post-modernist view of the world see this as a positive sign, arguing that Western television networks operating in India have had to adapt to Indian conditions, exemplified by the growth of Indian-made programmes in Indian languages, broadcast on foreign-owned satellite channels.

To contextualise this global-local interaction, it would be useful to examine the background of the profound changes that Indian television has undergone since the early 1990s, accelerated by the combined impact of new communication technologies and the opening up of global markets. Economic liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation have contributed to the expansion of Indian media corporations, facilitated by joint ventures with international media conglomerates.

Such developments have revolutionised broadcasting in what used to be a heavily protected media market, certainly the most regulated among the world's democracies. Gradual deregulation and privatisation of television has transformed the media landscape in the country. This is evident in the exponential growth in the number of television channels, in the post-Cold war era - from *Doordarshan* the sole state-controlled and rather bland network whose programmes were seen to be 'insipid and uninspired,' (Gupta, 1998, p. 31) in 1991, to more than 70 in 2000. Out of these, 20 are in Hindi or English and therefore national in reach, while others cater to regional audiences in their own languages. Table One lists some of the main bilingual channels operational in early 2000.

**Table 1 The Main Bilingual Channels in India**

<b>Channel</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Languages</b>
MTV India	Music	Hindi/English
Music Asia	Music	Hindi/English
Channel V	Music	Hindi/English
Disney	Animation	Hindi/English
Star News	News	Hindi/English
Star Plus	General	Hindi/English
TVI	Entertainment	Hindi/English
Star Sports	Sports	Hindi/English
SET MAX	Sports	Hindi/English
*Zee TV	General	Hindi/English

\*only a few programmes are in English

Source: Adapted from *Satellite & Cable TV*, June 2000

The privatisation of broadcasting encouraged many Western transnational media players to enter the 'emerging market' of India - potentially one of the world's biggest English-language television markets. Not least of the attractions were the existence of a huge middle class - estimated between 200-300 million - with aspirations to a Western lifestyle; a well-developed national satellite network, linking the vast country, and a fast-growing advertising sector.

Since its inception in the 1950s as a government propaganda organisation, television was seen as a means of disseminating state policies, and its main aim was to foster a feeling of national identity. The ethos was based on the public-service model of broadcasting, with clear emphasis on education and information at the expense of entertainment (Chatterjee, 1991). Borrowing the best traditions of the BBC, the broadcasting of high and 'authentic' Indian culture, in the form of classical dance and music, was encouraged, to raise the audiences' cultural tastes and values in preference to popular or populist forms of television (Gupta, 1998).

The entry of global media conglomerates into India, first through the live coverage of the 1990-91 Gulf crisis by the Cable News Network (CNN) and later through Hong Kong based Star (Satellite Television Asian Region) TV, part of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, opened up a new window for transnational visual experience for Indian audiences. Star's five-channel satellite service in English (Plus, Prime Sports, Channel V, the BBC World and Movie) started in 1991, became a major hit with the English-fluent urban elite and the advertisers, who saw in these channels a way to reach India's affluent classes.

The rapid growth in advertising revenues ensured that cable and satellite television extended their penetration of Indian market substantially - from 1.2 million homes having cable and satellite television in 1992 to more than 25 million cable TV homes by 2000. Among the main channels were major transnational broadcasters - CNN, Disney, CNBC, MTV, Star, Sony Entertainment Television, BBC, and Discovery - and scores of Indian channels, operating both at regional and national levels.

After an initial infatuation with Western English-language programming, especially with its liberal attitudes to sexual subjects, hitherto a taboo on Indian airwaves, it became apparent that the Indian audience preferred television in their own languages, prompting global media companies to adapt their programming strategies to suit the local marketplace. Star started the process of hybridisation when it realised that its mainly US-originated programming was being viewed by only a very small urban elite. It therefore started adding Hindi sub-titles to Hollywood films, and dubbing popular US soaps into Hindi. In 1996, Star Plus began telecasting locally made programmes in English and Hindi, in addition to Western programmes.

The sheer logic of market pressure - localising the products to reach a wider consumer base and increase advertising revenues, was at the heart of this localisation strategy. 'Instead of positioning itself as covert imposition of Western culture, characteristic of the nineteenth and twentieth century imperialism, globalisation appears to undercut Western authority through the cosmopolitan culture it promises for the Indian upper middle class and a stress on the local' (Pendakur and Kapur, 1997, p. 201).

### **The Language of Television in India**

In studies exploring the impact of media globalisation in India (Pendakur and Kapur, 1997; Melkote, Shields and Agrawal (eds), 1998; Gupta, 1998), the issue of media language has largely been ignored. In a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual country like India, language is a crucial element of cultural self-expression. Reflecting its colonial history, English remains the link language in India - of national judiciary and bureaucracy, higher education and corporate sector - while Hindi, with its regional variations, is the most widely spoken language. It is also the language of India's film industry, which annually produces more films than Hollywood. However, the usage of English in India signifies a particular social class, with its attendant power and influence. Competence in the language privileges the user in the most important social areas - for example in acquiring top jobs in government and commerce, especially with transnational corporations.

With a well-established oral tradition of communication, 400 languages are spoken across the country, while the Indian Constitution recognises 18 languages. Based on the 1991 census figures, Hindi is spoken as a first language by nearly 40 per cent of India's population - more than 337 million (Government of India, 1999). India is a country where multilingualism is the norm. According to government figures, nearly 20 per cent of the population is bilingual, while just over 7 per cent is trilingual. For 90 million Indians, English is a second or third language; 8 per cent of the population use English as a second language and more than 3 per cent know it as a third language (Vijayanunni, 1999).

In a country with low literacy levels, a medium such as television acquires additional significance. In a diverse and multilingual country such as India, The role of state broadcaster has been to promote national integration and a unified language was seen as a crucial element of that strategy. Though *Doordarshan* tried to cater for regional feelings through its local centres which broadcast in India's various languages, its 'National Programme,' aimed at a pan-Indian viewership, launched in the mid-1980s, was only in Hindi and English. The Hindi and English telecast were not universally liked. They were seen as being Delhi-centric and privileging Hindi over the other languages just because of the sheer number of its speakers. Re-

sentiment also arose even among the Hindi-speaking areas about the kind of Hindi being used on the national broadcaster - it was pure and literary, alienating the majority who spoke a version of 'bazaar' Hindi. Similarly, the English used on television was elitist, the so-called 'Queen's English'.

### **The Coming of Hinglish**

Western-owned or inspired television recognised this language 'problem' and therefore encouraged mixing of English and Hindi and the evolution of a hybrid media language - Hinglish. The emergence of a mixed media idiom, characterised by the growth of Hinglish, has dominated cultural production in the India of 1990s. Hinglish has been identified by the burgeoning mass media as the language of the youth of a 'liberalised' and 'modern' India. The language of the mass media reflects prevailing cultural trends in a society and if Hinglish - both in its verbal and visual version - has become a key element of media language - it signifies the growing importance of English language in the media discourse. By regularly using it, television constantly gives the new language currency and ultimately legitimacy.

While a form of Hinglish had been in existence in urban north India for decades, it was popularised by Zee TV, India's first private Hindi-language and most successful satellite channel (Thomas, 1998). Launched in 1992 by the Essel Group of Indian entrepreneur Subhash Chandra and targeted at the mass market with its pioneering Hindi-films-based television entertainment, Zee TV broke new grounds in nationally produced entertainment - adapting derivatives of Western programme formats such as quiz contests, game-and-chat shows and its own version of MTV, *Music Asia*. This music-based channel has contributed immensely to the popularisation of Hinglish, particularly among youth. Music Asia used Indian languages with elements of popular Indian culture, regional and folk to rework them around the rhythm and beat of Western popular music with accompanying visuals located in India and Indian milieus. Having entered popular youth music, Hinglish has also become the language of music albums for children, for example, *Jantar Mantar*, a fusion of indiepop, rap, reggae, samba and party songs, catchy rhymes and narrative stories.

Zee was following a trend which began in India's film industry, the so-called Bollywood, where use of Hinglish in dialogues and in songs has steadily increased in the 1990s. The advertising industry too contributed significantly in popularising the new hybridity, with such hugely successful commercials using Hinglish as *Yehi hai* (only this is) *right choice*, *baby* for Pepsi.

Zee was the first network to elevate this new language by using it in a more serious genre such as news, which had always been in either pure Hindi or in 'BBC

English'. It received a boost when Zee News adopted the style of Hinglish. By using English words, Zee aimed to expand its reach beyond the Hindi-speaking regions of India to cater to regional audience, and the South Asian diaspora, who may be more amenable to a hybrid variety of television. Like other commercial channels, Zee is dependent on advertisers, and is therefore acutely aware that language can influence people in their buying choices, a contributing factor why it used Hinglish, the language of the urban middle class.

Other channels, even those originally targeted exclusively at the English-fluent Westernised Indians, followed on the footsteps of Zee, and were forced to use Hinglish to widen their reach. One example of this global-local hybridisation is to be seen in the way Star Plus, the main India-specific channel of the Star network, was marketed, with its motto - '*Aapki boli - aapka Plus Point*' (Your own language is your Plus point).

Indian television software companies such as *Television Eighteen*, which make English-language entertainment and informational programmes for transnational broadcasters such as the 'India Show' on Star Plus or the 'India Business Report' on BBC, increasingly use Hinglish (Datta, 1999). There have even been arguments put forward by advertising executives to sell Hinglish as 'a brand, an identity, an individuality'. According to one senior advertising executive: 'As English gets too boring a language to use in our colloquialisms, there is bound to be an urge to discover the truly regional and the truly 'desi'(native). As this urge translates itself into patterns that dictate choice and appeal, the truly Indian brand names will start happening' (Bijoor, 2000).

Another area where Hinglish has emerged as a major source of communications is on-line media. In chat-rooms and India-related Internet portals, the use of this hybrid language is increasingly visible. One of the most talked-about web-based magazines is *Tehelka.com* (sensation) which gained national and international attention when in the summer of 2000 it broke the story about alleged involvement of Indian cricketers in match fixing. There are also bilingual computer programmes such as *Sulipi*, in which each Hindi character is mapped onto a similar sounding English letter, to cater to the Hinglish savvy 'netizens' (Anand, 1999).

Although television schedules remain dominated by Hindi or Hinglish programmes largely based on Hindi films and film-based music, which have traditionally held a prominent place in India's popular culture, Western cultural influence is still subtly present, detectable in the types of programmes, the borrowing and mixing of genres, in the kind of cultural messages being broadcast in a language which promotes itself as liberating, 'modern' to be contrasted with traditionalism of a deeply conservative society. The 'loss of language' that seems to afflict popular mu-

sic is resented by many. Jagjit Singh, India's best known semi-classical singer, feels television channels are primarily responsible for the current impurity. 'Why are they trying to popularise Hinglish as the language of the youth?' (quoted in Kazmi, 1999).

Like other hybridised forms of language, Hinglish does not have a clearly defined phonology, grammar and lexicon. The degree of language mixing is also varied, given the linguistic complexity of a country of continental character. Such a phenomenon is not typical to India. It can be seen as a part of the globalisation process for the homogenisation of language (Mohan, 1995). In other multilingual regions - for example in Hong Kong - a hybridised language, 'Chinglish' (a mixture of Chinese and English in Hong Kong) is in use, especially among the middle class. Mixing codes and conventions of other languages is a normal feature of bilingualism. In countries where English is used alongside other languages, some amount of code-mixing inevitably takes place, more in spoken than in written varieties. The hybridised languages are given blended names to show their origins such as *Japlish*, *Anglikaans*, and *Angldeutsch*.

### **Hinglish - The Language of Postmodern Television**

Given its domination of global media, commerce and communication, English has emerged as an important vehicle for the globalisation of the Western version of capitalism. This unrivalled domination has an historical context, as a well-known scholar of English language notes: 'The present-day world status of English is primarily the result of two factors: the expansion of British colonial power, which peaked towards the end of the 19th century, and the emergence of the United States as the leading economic power of the 20th century. It is the latter factor which continues to explain the position of the English language today' (Crystal, 1995, p. 106).

It is now fashionable to use the phrase 'Englishes' to describe the international varieties of English prevalent in the world. The 'messiness' characterising current international English has created 'many kinds of English and many other languages, producing clarity here, confusion there, and novelties and nonsense everywhere. The result can be - often is - chaotic, but despite the blurred edges, this latter-day Babel manages to work' (McArthur, 1998, p. 22).

This capacity of English to transcend differences of culture, geography, race and religion has ensured that many countries consider it to be their own language, as one Indian analyst noted: 'We must note that English does not necessarily mean British English or American English. There are a number of standard Englishes, for there are several English-speaking countries in each of which there is a standard English peculiar to that country' (Verma, 1982, p. 175).

Arguing for a *swadeshi* (native) variety of English, Verma, a senior academic based in India's Central Institute for English and Foreign Languages, insists that the Indianness of the English used in India 'lies in the fact that, within the overall general framework of the systems of English English, it displays certain distinguishing phonological, lexico-semantic, and also syntactic features. In terms of linguistic efficiency, these patterns are as good as any other. They are not corrupt, but rather different forms of the same language' (Verma, 1982, p. 180).

Although only three per cent of Indians use English as a first language, it carries a disproportionate degree of social and intellectual prestige, perhaps a reflection of the colonial hangover, prompting some to view English as hegemonic (Kachru, 1996). It has also been argued that given the long history of contacts of English language with India - the first interactions took place during Elizabethan time - the language has been Indianised to the extent that it has become an 'indigenous language and therefore available to all Indians' (D'Souza, 1999, p. 103). A hybridised variety of English language, it is now being argued, is breaking down linguistic, caste and class barriers. In the past two decades, a new confidence and aggression in the use of the English language can be detected, notably in the birth of post-colonial idioms in Indian writing by highly commercially successful and critically acclaimed authors of Indian origin writing in English.

### **The Expansion of Hinglish**

Globalisation and the advent of satellite television has ensured that the migrant communities of South Asians in the Middle East, Europe and North America have become a new target as consumers or audiences. The language that seems to address this hitherto unexplored market is Hinglish, a language with which the migrants feel more at ease. By using English words, networks such as Zee aims to expand its reach beyond the Hindi-speaking regions of India to cater to regional audiences, and the South Asian diaspora, who may be more amenable to a hybrid variety of television.

There is a certain amount of empathy with hybridised languages and culture among the South Asian diaspora. The members of this ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse group want to keep their links with their countries of origin. Though these groups speak a myriad of languages, most of them at least understand some Hindi, due largely to the popularity of Hindi films. Among the second and third generation Asians who have grown up within other cultures, Hinglish is the language they can relate to relatively easily. The use of Hinglish has been a contributing factor in the expansion of Indian television outside the borders of the country.



Zee was among the first to recognise the potential of overseas markets for its programming. In its zeal to rope in pan-Indian audiences scattered throughout the world, Zee developed a new idiom which by virtue of sheer reach of the medium contributed to democratising Hinglish. After Star TV purchased 50 per cent of *Asia Today* (the Hong Kong-based broadcaster of Zee TV) in 1993, it became Zee's partner in India, facilitating the Zee network's expansion within India and outside (Tobin, 1999). Following their 1992 launch in the Middle East, Zee TV entered the lucrative British market in 1995, when it bought *TV Asia*, which was already established in the UK. In 1999, Zee was available on the Sky network and claimed to have one million subscribers in UK and continental Europe. It was one of the first channels to go digital in the UK, offering programming in Hindi and other South Asian languages, namely Bengali, Urdu, Gujarati and Punjabi (Balakrishnan, 2000). Having acquired a base in the UK, Zee is expanding into mainland Europe - already its UK-based feed is available on Portuguese cable platform TV Cabo, Norwegian cable operator Telenor, TeleDenmark in Denmark and on the Casema cable system in the Netherlands. In 1997, Zee entered into a joint venture with a South Africa-based platform operator, MultiChoice, and within two years, it had 50,000 subscribers, mostly in South Africa.

By 2000, Zee claimed to be 'the world's largest Asian television network,' covering Asia, Europe, US and Africa, catering to the 24 million strong Indian diaspora. In Asia, where it says it has a total viewership of 180 million, the network spans more than 43 countries and offers round the clock programming. Having reached more than 23 million homes in the Indian sub-continent and United Arab Emirates, Zee's strategy now is to expand its operations in the lucrative North American market.

Zee considered its strength to be its indigenous programming in Indian languages. After Star started making programmes in Hindi, it became a direct competitor for Zee, creating business rivalry between the two operations of News Corporation in India. In September 1999, in an unprecedented action, Zee bought back Star's 50 per cent share in the company, establishing Zee as a major media player in its own right. By 2000, Zee's media and communication empire included cable and satellite channels in three continents, along with interests in film-production, publishing, cable distribution and satellite telephones. In mid-2000, Zee had three subscription channels - *Zee Cinema*, *Zee Movies* and *Zee English* as well as four regional channels under its Alpha bouquet - Alpha Marathi, Alpha Gujarati, Alpha Punjabi and Alpha Bengali. In addition, the network also had three free-to-air channels - *Zee TV*, *Zee News* and *Music Asia* (Satellite & Cable TV, 2000).

Other channels are also increasingly going global. Already, Star TV supplies daily programming to an ethnic American pay channel, EABC, and to Channel East in

Britain. Following their parting of ways with the Zee network, in January 2000, Star Plus, the flagship channel from the Star TV network in India, announced that it was repositioning with Hindi and 'Hinglish' as its medium. As Indian media businesses begin to integrate with global economy, Indian television could become an international player, though the question must be raised whether global status would be acquired at the expense of a hybridised language.

### **Towards a Political Economy of Hinglish Television**

Media transnationals operating in India have recognised that to communicate effectively with the majority of Indians, a mixture of Hindi and English will do as a first step towards overcoming the complicated linguistic reality of India. Advertisements too have used this idiom to target a bigger market. The anchoring of popular programmes on TV in Hinglish is with an eye on widening the base of the target audience - a youthful, confident and modern Indian. It has been said that English is 'no more the language of the imperialist, a tongue better spoken by Indians than many Britons themselves today. It could hasten our progress, making us the envy of the world' (Joseph, 1997).

By merging the two languages, the transnational media corporations and the advertisers aim to widen the base of participants in televised consumerism. In a ratings-driven media environment, television channels are seeking to create a global community of consumers who are basically unequal and without genuine empowerment. The emergence of new languages on television is generated by the globalising media market, made possible by rapid changes in communication technologies.

Hinglish television is also helping to create new common markets among those who aspire to Western lifestyle and its culture of consumption. As a recent study argues: 'the US media in general and Hollywood in particular have provided, and still provide huge support in other areas of American international leadership. One is the general field of fast-moving consumer goods; America's fast-moving consumer media have promoted and exported the popular culture of which these consumer goods are a central part' (Tunstall and Machin, 1999, p. 5).

There is a tendency to view the growth of Hinglish as a sign of the coming of age of India, a traditionally backward country finally joining the West, singing its songs, wearing its clothes and thinking its thoughts. The acceptance and the legitimization by Westernised or Western-owned television of what may be called 'mediated modernity' excludes a large proportion of India's population. Though Hinglish can be seen to be more inclusive as a communication vehicle than traditional English, its mixed idiom has not done much to effect a restructuring of power relations that

the command over the English language has created in countries once colonised by Britain or the United States, in its formal or informal empires.

Not surprising, therefore that the Hinglish-oriented television networks have forgotten the rural poor (Thussu, 1998). Those who do not communicate in Hinglish are remarkably absent from dramas and serials on channels such as Zee – according to a 1998 survey, less than two per cent of Zee viewers live in rural areas ( *Sate Illite & Cable TV*, 1999).

It is important to remind ourselves that domination through language is one of the ways in which hegemonies can be perpetuated. Despite its populism, Hinglish remains an elite idiom and excludes the vast majority of television viewers. A socially relevant television agenda, therefore, does not fit well with the private television networks, who are interested in the demographically desirable, Hinglish-speaking urban middle class, with the disposable income to purchase the goods advertised on the commercial channels.

Those without such sums can be conveniently forgotten, even by the state broadcaster, which increasingly has to compete with commercial television networks. Development-oriented television remains largely marginalised, primarily because it does not interest advertisers. It is ironic that the country where 40 per cent of the population is still illiterate, has ignored the educational potential of television. Widespread poverty and equality still exist in India, where primary education has fared particularly badly. According to the United Nations, 30 per cent of all Indian children aged six to 14 years - about 59 million children - are not in school (UNDP, 2000).

Though by 2000, *Doordarshan* was operating 20 channels, and claiming that total number of viewers who watch its programmes at least once a week to be around 500 million, it is under constant commercial pressure to provide entertainment of a hybrid variety at the expense of educational programmes. Crucially, Hinglish-led television could adversely affect the public-service role of television, whose egalitarian potential remains hugely underexplored in India. More importantly, it can help legitimise a corporatised worldview, which champions neoliberal capitalism.

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