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Article

The Influence of English as a Lingua Franca on Cultural Identity in Multilingual Communities of Delhi, India

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Abstract:

In the multicultural cities of India, especially in Delhi, English has become a lingua franca that is transforming the cultural identities in the context of the rapidly expanding globalization. This paper will focus on the effects of English in cultural understanding and social relations among the multilingual communities in Delhi. Using qualitative approaches, such as literature review and narrative descriptions, the study demonstrates the importance of English in providing access to wider communication and promoting social mobility, in particular educational and professional arenas. Simultaneously, it points out the major issues that are associated with this linguistic change: the progressive loss of native languages, the risk of cultural assimilation, and the strengthening of social barriers between English-speaking and non-English speaking populations. The results reflect the bargain that people engage in between maintaining native linguistic identity and the practical advantages of English, showing a complex balance of possibilities and cultural conflicts in the multilingual city of Delhi.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, English, India, Lingua Franca, Multilingualism

1. INTRODUCTION

Effective communication between and among cultures and languages has become a very important issue in the present globalizing world (Sahadevan & Sumangala, 2021). The capital of India, Delhi, is a living example of this diversity as more than 100 languages are spoken in this melting pot of neighborhoods. Introduced as the language of governance and education during the British colonial era (Kambala & Mathe, 2023), English has since become a language of opportunity, mobility and prestige- at least in some socio-economic contexts (Garras, 2025).

Even though it has been in the limelight, Delhi is not linguistically or culturally homogeneous. In the wealthier regions like South Delhi, English is commonly used as a primary language of communication as well as a tool to enhance social status, infiltrating the school, workplace, and everyday life (Pallavi, P. (n.d.). On the contrary, in slums such as Kusumpur Pahari or peri-urban settlements such as Najafgarh, Hindi and local languages are prevalent and English can be seen as inaccessible, irrelevant or marginal to everyday life (LaDousa, 2022). English in Delhi is not merely a means of functional communication but is closely related to identity, belonging and aspiration. To many, English language skills are the keys to tertiary education, white-collar jobs, and international contacts. However, its supremacy can also lead to the alienation of the local languages and cultures, which are a part of linguistic attrition and cultural dilution (Ghose et al., 2024). In the communities where English is not as dominant, poor knowledge may create a feeling of marginalization in the so-called mainstream or globalized vision of Delhi, which further exacerbates social differences and promotes

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inequality. It is in this background that Delhi has become a significant location in the study of how English as lingua franca constructs the interplay between language (Marlina & Xu, 2018), power and identity in a changing urban landscape. Whereas the existing literature has discussed the role of English in defining current Indian identities in India, little has been said about how this process differs in different social and geographical contexts within the city (Sarkar, 2024).

This paper seeks to fill that gap by examining the role of English as a lingua franca in the various communities in Delhi (Iyer & Ramachandran, 2019), with emphasis on its effects on cultural identity. It looks at the way English proficiency shapes self-perception and social opportunity in elite urban enclaves, informal settlements, peri-urban areas, and the historic quarters of Old Delhi. It also looks at the implication of maintaining local languages and cultural practices. Based on literature review, semi-structured interviews and a comparative analysis of neighborhoods, the study provides a complex picture of the interaction between language and identity in the socio-linguistically diverse environment of Delhi. The ultimate goal of the findings is to inform language policy, education practice and community efforts that promote both social inclusion and linguistic diversity in the capital (Tollefson & Tsui, 2014).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

2.1. Historical Context of English in India:

The introduction of English with the British colonial rule resulted in a permanent transformation in the linguistic landscape in India. In Delhi, the colonial education policies favored English education among the elite, and places like Delhi University aided in establishing English as the language of higher learning. This colonial heritage persists with English still being regarded in cities as a source of prestige and gateway to opportunity, an image that is further enhanced by its close connection to socioeconomic mobility and globalization. (Kachru B. Braj, 1983)

2.2. Colonial Legacy:

The colonial administrators pursued English language in place of the indigenous languages by pursuing educational reforms, most notably the minutes of 1835. The aim of this policy was to develop a group of English-educated intermediaries who were Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, opinion, morals and intellect. The outcome was a firmly established linguistic stratification, which created a social group that was able to speak English but was increasingly alienated from their original culture. English is still dominant in academic and professional spheres in modern India, and local language cultures are still frequently relegated and pushed to the sidelines.

2.3. Language and Cultural Identity:

Language is one of the main aspects of cultural identity creation as it is not only a method of communication but also a source of values, history, and traditions. The English language in a multilingual environment like Delhi adds further dimensions to conventional ideas of identity.

Studies have shown that people tend to feel culturally displaced when they switch between their mother-tongues and English, which is a representation of the internal workings and adaptations that occur in multilingual settings. (Pennycook, 2017)

2.4. The Emergence of Hinglish:

Among the most evident effects of the long-term presence of English in India is the emergence of Hinglish, a mixed language combining Hindi and English. In Delhi, Hinglish has been a major mode of expression in the daily discourse, advertisement, media, and social interactions. This synthesis allows speakers to harmonize local cultural identity and their involvement in the global discourse. The fluidity of Hinglish demonstrates the negotiating process of identity and belonging in the urban, multilingual spaces of India. (Bianco Lo Joseph, 2012).

2.5. Globalization's Impact on Language Use:

Globalization has increased the importance of English in Delhi because it has enhanced the use of English in business, education, and technology. The greater use of English words and styles in the local languages is an indicator of this tendency. Although mastering English means increased social and economic opportunities, it also leads to the issue of native languages and cultural traditions being lost. Recent studies argue that though English provides opportunities to people, it is at risk of marginalizing regional languages and practices and establishing new social hierarchies. (Chandan, 2022)

2.6. Multilingualism and Identity Negotiation:

Delhi's vibrant linguistic landscape invites closer examination of how language serves as a tool for shaping and renegotiating identity. For many young adults, the use of regional languages is tied to a deep connection with Indian heritage, while proficiency in English is often associated with a cosmopolitan, globally oriented self-image. This coexistence of cultural rootedness and global aspiration reflects the complex, fluid relationship between language choice and both personal and collective identity in multilingual communities. (Ranjan Mahto, n.d.)

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design and Rationale:

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research design to examine the role of English as a lingua franca in shaping cultural identity within Delhi's multilingual communities (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). A qualitative approach was selected because the investigation centers on lived experiences, personal perceptions, and the negotiation of identity—dimensions that require attention to context, subjectivity, and depth of meaning. While quantitative surveys can identify broad trends, they are less suited to capturing the subtleties of the language–identity relationship and the emotional aspects of cultural belonging. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, this research proceeds from the understanding that reality is socially constructed, and

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that language choice both reflects and influences processes of identity formation. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method, enabling participants to share their experiences in their own words while allowing the researcher to explore emerging themes beyond the scope of pre-formulated questions.

3.2. Research Context:

The study was situated in Delhi, a city marked by exceptional cultural and linguistic diversity, with more than 100 languages spoken across its expanse. To capture the varied experiences of English use across different socio-economic and spatial settings, "data collection was conducted in four distinct urban contexts":

1. Affluent urban districts (e.g., South Delhi), where English predominates in education, professional environments, and social interaction.
2. Informal settlements (e.g., Kusumpur Pahari), where Hindi and regional languages dominate, and English proficiency is highly uneven.
3. Peri-urban villages (e.g., Najafgarh), characterized by a blend of rural and urban linguistic practices.
4. Historic quarters of Old Delhi, where Urdu and Hindi traditions remain deeply rooted, with selective incorporation of English.

3.3. Sampling Strategy and Participant Recruitment:

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure the inclusion of participants from varied linguistic backgrounds, socio-economic strata, and educational levels. Within each research site, snowball sampling was also utilized, whereby initial respondents referred additional individuals who met the study's inclusion criteria.

1. Sample Size: 100 participants
2. Age Range: "18–40 years", selected to capture generational differences in language exposure and identity negotiation
3. Languages Spoken: Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu, Bengali, Bihari dialects, and English, with some participants also fluent in lesser-known Indian languages
4. Profession/Education: University students, educators, corporate professionals, service industry workers, and self-employed individuals.

Participants were recruited through community organizations, university networks, workplace contacts, and informal social circles. All received an information sheet outlining the study's objectives, methodology, and ethical considerations in their preferred language. Written consent was obtained from each participant before data collection commenced.

3.4. Interview Protocol and Data Collection Procedures:

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format, guided by a set of prepared questions addressing language use, perceptions of identity, and the socio-cultural implications of English. The three core questions were:

How do you perceive your identity when speaking different languages?

What role does English play in your daily life?

Have you experienced any conflicts between your native language and English?

Follow-up prompts encouraged participants to elaborate on language use in education, employment, family interactions, media engagement, and self-presentation in varying social settings.

Language of Interview: Sessions were conducted in English, Hindi, or Hinglish, depending on participant preference. In cases of bilingual or multilingual responses, all segments were recorded verbatim.

Location & Duration: Interviews took place in participants' homes, community centers, cafés, or via secure online video conferencing, with each session lasting between 35 and 65 minutes.

Timeline: Data collection was carried out over a four-month period to provide scheduling flexibility and ensure participant availability.

3.5. Translation, Transcription, and Data Management:

Hindi/Hinglish interviews were translated into English by the researcher, and special care was taken to maintain idiomatic expressions and cultural contexts. To ensure accuracy, all translations were cross-checked by a bilingual expert. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymized, identifying information was replaced by pseudonyms. All data were safely stored in a password-protected device and in accordance with strict confidentiality and ethical research protocols.

3.6. Data Analysis:

The collected interview data were examined using thematic analysis, a flexible qualitative method that facilitates the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns within textual data. The approach followed closely the influential framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which enabled a thorough and systematic exploration of participants' narratives related to language use and cultural identity. The analysis began with an immersive familiarization phase, where the researcher engaged in multiple careful readings of the interview transcripts. This iterative process helped to develop a deep understanding of the data's breadth and richness, while also allowing early insights and reflexive notes to emerge.

Next, the data were segmented into meaningful units which were labeled with initial descriptive codes. These codes captured significant features of the data relevant to the study's focus—such as expressions about language choice, personal and social identity, and cultural experiences associated with English and multilingualism. Rather than

limiting coding to pre-existing categories, an inductive approach was adopted to capture nuanced and unexpected interpretations.

Once coding was complete, similar codes were clustered together, giving rise to broader thematic categories. The emerging themes captured important conceptual dimensions of the data—including tensions around cultural conflict, the aspiration for social mobility through English, concerns of language erosion, creation of hybrid identities like Hinglish, and forms of resistance against English language dominance. These themes underwent a rigorous review and refinement process, which involved repeated examination of coded data extracts to evaluate internal consistency and distinctiveness between themes. Themes were reworked, merged, or split as needed to enhance clarity and ensure they meaningfully represented patterns across the dataset.

Finally, detailed descriptions and names were assigned to each theme to clearly convey their core meanings, illustrated by carefully selected participant quotations that exemplified the lived experiences reflected in the findings. To support systematic coding and facilitate data organization, an open-source qualitative analysis tool called Taguette was used. Throughout the analytical process, the researcher maintained reflexive notes, documenting decision-making rationales and reflections on potential biases, thereby enhancing the rigor and transparency of the analysis.

3.7. Ethical Considerations:

This study followed established ethical research protocols, ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, and participants' right to withdraw at any stage. Anonymity was guaranteed, with all personal identifiers removed from the dataset. Sensitive topics particularly those relating to identity and perceived marginalization was approached with cultural awareness and respect. Ethical approval was obtained from the academic institution responsible for overseeing the research.

3.8. Researcher Reflexivity:

As a multilingual speaker with direct experience of Delhi's linguistic diversity, the researcher remained conscious of their potential influence on both the generation and interpretation of data. Reflexive memos were used to document occasions when shared language or cultural familiarity contributed to building rapport, and enhanced participant openness, or shaped the trajectory of interviews.

3.9. Limitations:

While this study sought to represent a wide range of voices across Delhi's diverse communities, its findings should be read as reflective rather than statistically representative. Because the study relied on self-reported experiences and perceptions, some participants may have presented their views in ways they felt were socially acceptable. In addition, certain communities were harder to access, which may have limited the inclusion of individuals whose perspectives are less visible in public discourse.

"Language, identity, and belonging are not static; they shift over time, so a single snapshot cannot capture the full story." Future research could follow individuals over months or years to trace how these shifts unfold in different social and cultural contexts.

By openly recognizing these limitations, the study invites further conversation and exploration, while offering an honest account of how the relationship between English and cultural identity is lived and negotiated in Delhi's multilingual landscape.

4. FINDINGS

Thematic analysis revealed several interconnected ways in which English, as a lingua franca, influences cultural identity within Delhi's multilingual communities. These themes reflect both the empowering possibilities and the subtle exclusions that English brings, varying significantly across socio-economic and geographic contexts. Key themes are outlined below, supported by participant quotations (pseudonyms used).

4.1. English as a Symbol of Social Mobility and Opportunity:

In wealthy neighborhoods and among those with middle-class backgrounds who were on the rise, English language competency was always presented as the key to better education, more lucrative employment and wider professional networks. Participants tended to talk about English as more than a language; it is a ticket to better jobs, or a skill required to survive in a competitive economy.

"*Even in my office where we all know how to speak Hindi; we still conduct meetings in English- it makes one sound educated and competent.*" (Ritika, 29, corporate professional - South Delhi). Participants from less privileged backgrounds shared this notion of English as a means to the upward mobility but were quick to add that there are structural inequalities in gaining access to quality English education.

4.2. Cultural Pride versus Cultural Erosion:

Although English was admired by many people due to its international scope and professional benefits, it also caused a certain uneasiness. Some of the participants believed that English tends to marginalize the native languages and traditional expression styles. This posed an emotional dilemma of wanting to take advantage of the opportunities that English offers and at the same time grieving the slow loss of their language roots. "*People at work believe that it is unprofessional when I attempt to speak my mother tongue. I, therefore, avoid it. But within me, I feel that I am gradually losing a part of myself.*" (Imran, 34, IT professional -Old Delhi).

This conflict was most apparent in younger respondents who had attended English-medium schools only, and native tongues were pushed to the periphery of informal or family life. To others, this was a kind of cultural erosion- an identity being remodeled by the demands of the contemporary urban experience.

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4.3. Hybrid Identity and the Rise of Hinglish:

For many, the answer to this tension wasn't to choose one language over another, but to merge them. Hinglish—the casual blending of Hindi and English—surfaced as a vibrant, living language of Delhi's streets, campuses, and social media. Participants from different backgrounds described Hinglish as effortless, even instinctive—a language that feels both local and global at once.

"*With my friends, I always mix Hindi and English—it feels like my real language. Pure Hindi sounds too formal, pure English too forced.*" (Priya, 22, university student – North Campus). Hinglish was especially popular among younger speakers, who saw it not as "*incorrect*" speech but as a badge of cultural identity—fluid, flexible, and uniquely theirs. It allowed them to move between social circles and cultural spaces without feeling like they were abandoning either side of their heritage.

Exclusion and Language-Based Social Boundaries:

For participants from informal settlements and peri-urban areas, English wasn't just a skill—it was a social filter. In spaces where English was the norm, the lack of fluency often meant being underestimated or left out entirely. While Hindi worked smoothly in public offices and local markets, private companies, high-end retail, and certain social circles seemed to demand English as a sign of competence.

"*If I go to a government office or hospital, Hindi works fine. But in private companies or malls, if you don't speak English, people treat you like you're less educated.*" (Ravinder, 28, worker – Najafgarh). Such experiences made clear that English can act as a gatekeeping tool—one that quietly reinforces socio-economic boundaries and influences who feels confident in particular environments.

4.4. Family Influence and Intergenerational Shifts:

The language that is spoken at home tended to influence the extent to which the participants felt attached to their cultural heritage. Even in the families where native languages were the priority, English-speaking young people were still strongly attached to the local identity. In other families, notably those of the middle- and higher-income brackets, parents actively promoted the use of English at home, as a ticket to the world.

"My parents ensured that we used Bengali at home. Although I work in English, I feel close to my roots." (Sohini, 31, teacher- East Delhi). These differing approaches to family life showed the generational divide: whether to maintain linguistic culture or to integrate completely into the requirements of an English-speaking future.

4.5. Negotiating Dual Identities:

To many, the choice of language was not fixed but fluid- a conscious change according to the social context. English was a language of professionalism, ambition, and cosmopolitan self-representation. Native languages, in their turn, were intimate, funny, and culturally warm. The ability to switch between them was not regarded as inauthentic, but as a necessary skill of moving between different worlds in the same city.

"*I am a different person in English and in Hindi. The discrepancy is not artificial- it is simply an adaptation to two different worlds.*" (Aditya, 26, marketing executive -South Delhi). This perpetual bargaining produced a fluid, stratified identity- one that could change without completely losing its origins.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of this research illuminate the multiple and even conflicting means through which English is used to shape construct cultural identity within the multilingual communities of Delhi. Although much of the patterns can be seen as reflecting what already exists in the literature, they also provide a new, ground-level insight into how the dynamics are lived by people.

5.1. English and Social Mobility:

In line with previous studies participants also repeatedly referred to English as the key to better opportunities be it in education, career advancement, or the global network. To some it represented ambition and progress, to others it was an unavoidable necessity of survival in a competitive economy. But this promise is not evenly dispensed: Those without access to quality English education often found themselves locked out of the same spaces where others thrived, reinforcing colonial-era divisions that gave early access to English only to the elite. In this way, English doesn't just open doors it also decides who gets to knock.

5.2. Cultural Identity and Language Erosion:

Alongside its clear benefits, English also carries cultural costs. Participants spoke of moments when using their mother tongue felt "out of place" or "unprofessional," reflecting a subtle erosion of linguistic confidence. This tension between practicality and preservation mirrors (Mittapalli, 2019) observations on cultural disorientation in bilingual contexts. For younger generations educated almost entirely in English, this often-meant drifting further from ancestral languages and traditions raising difficult questions about what might be lost in the process of gaining global fluency.

5.3. Emergence of Hinglish and Hybrid Identities:

Hinglish emerged as a lively, creative space where people could be both local and global at once. Far from being seen as a dilution of language, it was embraced as a cultural signature, especially by younger speakers who saw it as "their" language. As (Bianco Lo Joseph, 2012) notes, hybrid forms like Hinglish allow speakers to reframe identity on their own terms, blending worlds without fully belonging to either. In Delhi's streets, cafes, and offices, Hinglish is more than a convenience, it's a badge of belonging.

5.4. Language as a Social Boundary:

At the same time, English still works as a gatekeeper. For

participants from informal settlements and peri-urban areas, its absence could mean invisibility in certain spaces. The ability or inability to speak English often shaped how others judged competence, education, and even worth. These lived realities echo broader sociolinguistic theories of language as a tool of power, but here they take on a tangible form in the everyday experiences of exclusion.

5.5. Intergenerational and Familial Influences:

Family language practices stood out as a quiet but powerful force. Some households maintained strict use of their mother tongue, nurturing deep cultural connections that even a full-time professional life in English could not erase. Others intentionally prioritized English at home, seeing it as an early investment in their children's futures. This mirrors findings by (Caldas. J Stephen, 2012) suggests that bilingualism does not have to mean cultural loss—if families consciously choose to preserve both.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The findings point to an urgent need to bridge the gap between the multilingual ideals of the NEP 2020 and everyday linguistic realities (National Education Policy 2020, n.d.). Despite progressive policies, English still functions as both a resource and a barrier, and native languages often carry reduced prestige in professional domains. Addressing this requires practical measures—such as multilingual teacher training, culturally relevant curricula, and public campaigns to destigmatize local languages—while also embracing hybrid practices like Hinglish as authentic modes of expression.

7. CONCLUSION

This study shows that English acts both as a connector and a divider in Delhi's multilingual landscape. It opens doors to communication, career growth, and global participation, yet it can also erode cultural traditions and deepen social inequalities. The rise of hybrid forms like Hinglish reflects how people creatively balance local roots with global influences. To truly support linguistic diversity, policies and community efforts must go beyond simply teaching English. They should encourage mother tongue learning, promote genuine bilingualism, and ensure fair access to quality English education. Such steps can help build an environment where different languages and the identities they carry can thrive together. Future studies could track how language attitudes and identities shift over time, especially among less visible groups, to better understand the changing relationship between language and identity in Delhi.

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