

# Is English the language of India's future?

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LEAPFROGGING is a natural mode of upward transition to a radically different state of equilibrium. According to Stephen Jay Gould,<sup>1</sup> the landscape of evolutionary change is not a smooth and continuous upward slope but a series of steps, with rocky cusps in between long stable plateau phases. Moving on past the cusps means taking an irreversible jump.

The notion of leapfrogging, in the Indian context, can easily be understood by looking at the dramatic changes we have gone through in the telephone sector in the last few years.

Twenty years ago, just getting a telephone connection involved a long wait, or having a family member who was entitled to a phone, or paying out a lot of money. Even, when one finally got the phone, one still felt trapped. Phones often did not work, and the phone company was usually unresponsive to complaints. Simply put, the ethos was one of shortage and limited access. This ethos was incompatible with the modern international ethos, where it was desirable to have all citizens 'connected'; where having a phone could no longer be restricted to an elite.

The experience of buying a cell phone is disorienting: you buy the phone, get your number at the same time, and make your first call before even leaving the shop. Many new phone owners never even go through the experience of getting a landline: they simply go straight for a cell phone. Even children can have their own phones. The landline sector wasn't reformed: it was transcended!

If we think of a pre-literate Indian dialect as analogous to not yet having a phone, then a standard regional Indian language would correspond to having a landline. Let us take the case of Hindi.

The history of modern Hindi is interesting. The modern 'Shuddh Hindi' of literacy did not simply grow smoothly out of the dialects of the Hindi heartland. According to Alok Rai, modern Shuddh Hindi, indeed, the choice of the Devanagari script, is the outcome of a power struggle in the mid-19th century between Brahmins and Kayasthas. Each group had its own writing system, Devanagari or Kaithi, and a number of schools teaching in that medium. By the time the Brahmins won out in the power struggle, English was already a language of importance to the top elite.

Shuddh Hindi did not come into being, according to Rai, to bring together the peoples of India equitably. The deliberate Sanskritization of Hindi was intended to block easy access to the semi-privileged community that 'owned' this language. Shuddh Hindi was actually constructed as a gatekeeper!

What has sustained the myth of the worthiness of Hindi as against English is the perception of Hindi as something local. Like the old land-line phone system, we had to believe in it, even though it was unable to connect us.

This is not a preposterous show of faith. We have before us many cases of societies that have made the transition to modernity using a key local language: Japan, China, Korea, Russia, Iran, Turkey. In the case of all these countries, having an indigenous standard language as the language of education, scientific research, commerce and administration has served to integrate their societies, and offer access to newcomers from the bottom ranks.

It has taken me a long time to realize how different India is from all these societies. First, for most of India's history, integration was not a significant concern. On the contrary, the Indian ruling class has almost always spoken a totally different language from the rest of the society. Sanskrit, Persian, and now English.

It also appears that it is a control of the discourse of science and technology that gives a language a hold over the future, not great literature and poetry. And at no time did Hindi grow into a language of science and technology in India. Instead, modern science has come up as a foreign-inspired scholarly exercise, and not as the upshot of the work of India's metallurgists, craftsmen and agriculturalists. Modern science in India is something inherently elite, and thus outside of Hindi territory.

Consequently, Hindi has persisted as just a language into which scientific material is translated down, from English, for the non-participants in this enterprise. Reading science textbooks in Hindi gives a strange sense of unreality, since we know that the real scientists never use these words as they work, even if they do speak to each other in Hindi. There is a sense of the reader being patronized, treated like a child. Given a make-believe version of the real thing, the sense of social division is ingrained, even in science textbooks!

The point here is that Hindi has become more of a quagmire for the non-elite than a facilitator of upward social mobility. If one opts to enter the world of Hindi in order to rise socially, one is doomed to spend a long time learning translated knowledge, only to have to dispense with it altogether when one lays siege to the ultimate citadel of power in India: English. One could get so sidetracked navigating one's way through the terrain of Hindi that one might never get to the stage of making that final assault on English.

But why aim for English at all, you might ask. Well, because English is the key to a much more empowered job market. Most of the jobs you could get from knowing only Hindi do not require the time and effort one would have to spend getting a college education in Hindi. Except for the mass media, where a good knowledge of Hindi can be a big plus – for script-writing, news casting or journalism – all other jobs in modern sectors favour candidates with a good knowledge of English. And these sectors are indifferent to a candidate's competence in Hindi.

Unfortunately, English, too, has been constructed as a gatekeeper language in India, a means of ensuring that the best jobs stay with the elite. So access to English will continue to be restricted. The elite will continue to argue for English and English-medium education (for itself!) on the grounds of English being a ‘global language’, while subtly ensuring that English retains its value as a class marker in India. The elite is not really going to help the others acquire English!

Fortunately for the non-elites, the fluent English of the elites is not the only English competence that has value. Vinita Vaish has studied the teaching of English in Hindi-medium schools of Delhi, and found that this method of teaching at best promotes a passive competence and a familiarity with written English that may be adequate for clerical work, though not for jobs the elite would want. Students learning English through these methods first learn a lot of English words and come to understand spoken Indian English, instead of first learning to construct sentences as second language classroom learners in developed countries do. And their written English is adequate only for dealing with things like filled-in forms.

This route, of picking up English words in isolation, and of passive competence preceding actual speaking, is something we see with children in families that speak both Hindi and English. In these families, children first learn Hindi and only hear English spoken by adults. Somehow they know that they are not ‘old enough’ to speak English. Then, at some point, parents notice that their child understands everything. Very soon after this, English starts coming out, haltingly, but in fully formed sentences, almost as though it had been waiting until it was ready to be born!

This indicates that there is a natural, or ‘organic’, route to learning an elite language that is radically different from the ‘efficient’ one promoted by well-designed pedagogy. To use the analogy of geometry, in one cosmology the shortest distance between two points would be a straight line (efficient pedagogy). In another cosmology, more sensitive to the topography of social space, a meandering course would be the most effective, as it would go with the flow and get you to a more native-like command over the language.

Now we are on familiar terrain. There is a form of transition to an elite language known as the continuum. In the 1960s linguists in the Caribbean noticed that Creole speakers did not learn English directly as a second language, keeping Creole and English separate. Instead they approached English in stages, acquiring control of different features of English, in a standardized order, treating them as higher-class alternatives to their Creole equivalents. Each speaker had control of a range of stages on the continuum, and could shift back and forth along that range to suit different social situations. Each stage on the continuum corresponded to a micro-stage in the social hierarchy.

The post-Creole continuum was a response to speakers seeing their own language stigmatized, but also finding instant upward access blocked. They simply did not interact enough with the elites to have them as linguistic models and learn their language directly. Venturing onto the continuum was the same as venturing into the middle class.

What are the necessary linguistic conditions that favour the continuum as a mode of transition? The two languages at the poles of the continuum must have a large amount of shared vocabulary. This is what provides the illusion of smooth transition. In the case of the Caribbean English Creoles, most of the lexicon was adapted from English at the time that the Creole came into existence. In the case of Hindi, there is a tradition of replacing Hindi words with English words by simply slotting English words into Hindi sentences. In between these words, in Creole and in Hindi, are the function words, grammatical markers and categories, and the word order itself, that are sharply different from their English counterparts. These are the features that have to be eliminated. The term for learning English in this way in the Caribbean is ‘decreolization’.

Present day India is in a state of transit from an ethos of shortage and limited access to a middle class ethos that requires connectedness. These two states are incompatible, which means that smooth transit is impossible. Transition will have to involve dislocation.

The genius of the continuum is that it presents this dislocation as a smooth span. How smooth is it, really, to first pick up English words and slot them into a Hindi sentence, then slot in larger English chunks, and then take out the Hindi structure altogether? Somewhere en route something that is basically Hindi is changing into something that is basically English.

At a purely linguistic level, a structural quantum gap is being crossed. To a Japanese, for example, approaching English and Japanese as two equally valid codes, this structural transition would be difficult. For an Indian on the continuum not only is the structural transition not seen as difficult, it is actually unnoticed, and hard to pinpoint! Hindi and English are not seen as two codes, but as interlocking spheres of a single competence. Both belong in the same complex social space. A newly acquired ability to operate a feature of English is exactly the same thing as a degree of upward social mobility, which is also the same thing as access to a new peer group that speaks this way and is available as a linguistic model. Unlike the rooted Japanese learner, the Indian learner of English is actually going through an identity change!

The first Indians to take their future into their own hands and venture, unassisted, onto the continuum must have had to struggle. Most would not have completed the crossover, and would have managed by acquiring a lot of English vocabulary to use in Hindi sentences, as well as a few useful English phrases. Pushed beyond their level of competence, they would actually translate the Hindi structure into English to cobble together the English words (‘Delhi-in i-stay?’). In other words, they would go off the continuum at these moments. They would translate, instead of speaking intuitively.

But now as more and more Indians venture onto the continuum, we may be witnessing a snowball effect. It is now a feasible learning strategy to approach English by slotting in English vocabulary into Hindi sentences, then increasing the size of the English chunks and slowly eliminating the Hindi. In the process, the community of reasonably good English speakers increases in size, the beginnings of a growing non-elite group of English speakers much more accessible to new

learners than the elite had been. The outcome of this process of transition, taken to its logical conclusion, would be an India (at least an urban India) similar to the Philippines, or South Africa, where everyone seems to handle English well, though poorer people who share an ethnic language may privately speak it together.

The continuum is how adults keep their footing as the bedrock shifts beneath them. But the true leap transcends it all and is a generational discontinuity. Little children from poorer families are sent, at great cost to their parents, to private English-medium schools. Here is a classic scenario of parents sacrificing and sending their children into an environment sharply different from their home environment in the name of upward mobility. The discontinuity this brings comes in the shape of an initial period of incomprehension, as the child adjusts to the bewildering new world. But it is precisely this period of incomprehension that corresponds to the 'leap over the cusp' and brings the big change in identity. Subsequently, the child will know its family language for interactions at home and interactions on the playground. But the bent for the future, for non-trivial discourse, will be towards English.

Why do parents put their children through this ordeal, this unnerving period of incomprehension? At a guess I would say that they know, beyond all doubt, that to get comfortable with education in an Indian language is to risk sticking there forever. These parents seem to feel that the time for effecting an identity change is very early in life. It is something the aspiring middle class has done since time immemorial: sacrifice, and bring up children in ways radically different from themselves.

Is this change really taking place? It is hard to tell, because the first stage is largely internal, invisible. A person who has ventured onto the continuum still has full control of the original regional Indian language, and if this is the regional language you have always interacted with him (or her) in, you will both continue this practice. The breakthrough comes as you notice, for the first time, that such people understand essentially everything you say in English, in more and more contexts. They reply, in Hindi, to questions asked of others in English.

Then come the bigger and bigger chunks of English unselfconsciously inserted into your discourse. The surprise, or amusement, when you use, for example, the Shuddh Hindi word for 'per cent': 'per cent' is a numerical concept that exists in English space! The effortless English spoken with foreigners (whose English is far less fluent than theirs!), while you both continue to speak in your shared Indian language. And then one day they put you out of your misery by switching altogether into English to explain something technical. After which they go back to Hindi for casual discourse with you.

More visible as a sign of change is the recent and sudden existence of little children who know English almost from the start, with barely enough command of an Indian language for

‘downwind’ communication with grandparents, or the poor, in trivial contexts. These children are the offspring of parents who were sent to English-medium schools, the ones who experienced the big dislocation. These parents have passed on their new identity to their children.

Why is all this happening? Well, to use a motorway analogy, as long as the non-elite only travelled locally, they could make do with country roads or the by-lanes of city mohallas. But the surge towards a modern middle class society has brought larger horizons, and travel. For travel it makes sense to get onto the motorway. And in India, the motorway language has always been English, the language of the elite (which quaintly calls itself the ‘middle class’). Hindi and other major Indian languages have never grown into ‘motorway languages’ the way Chinese, Japanese and Korean have. The price we now pay for keeping English at the top of our linguistic pile is that our local languages take a beating as the non-elite equates them with a sub-middle class existence.

Is this a tragedy? Only if you see our languages as things in themselves, unlinked to the fortunes of their speaker communities. But if a language is inextricable from its socioeconomic ecosystem, all we are seeing is another form of migration: human survivors linguistically moving on as the world shifts beneath their unmoving feet. Climbing the rocks to a new home on the plateau just above, as their old home gets submerged, below the poverty line.

But the biggest change of all is in English, even though its structure does not change at all. English will experience a demographic surge that will transform it from its present role as an elite language. It will become harder for the elite to discriminate against the non-elite by citing their inadequate command of English. This has real potential for social reform.

Will Indian languages survive this? Can English share space peacefully with Indian languages? At a guess, no. Diglossia (a bilingual situation where one language has high status and the other low) is inherently unstable. It only seems sustainable in a pre-middle class society where the lower linguistic niches (dialects, regional Indian languages) define sustainable socioeconomic spaces (‘above sea level’). But the transition to a mass middle class society is vastly more disruptive of the social fabric than those early forays into bilingualism. With English percolating lower and lower down to very small children, even the language balance in the home will get disrupted.

Keeping two languages current, when the functional space of one is shrinking fast, becomes difficult. It becomes an effort of will. It becomes duplicative behaviour: trying to keep on doing an activity in the weaker language that one already does adequately in its replacement. Eventually we will stop.

And with less and less of the poor there maintaining the illusion that ‘our’ languages are being used (though not by ‘us’!), the languages themselves will vanish. Leaving us all alive, but changed.

There is something exciting in being surprised by a turn of events, and proved wrong. I spent a quarter of a century agitating for India to do like Japan, China and Korea, for the government to take the initiative in integrating the elite with the non-elite by having school education only in local languages. And restoring to Indian languages the top end of their functional range, now occupied by English. But it didn't happen. The elite simply won't give up English.

So now, the non-elite has taken charge of the situation by laying claim to the language associated in India with a middle class existence. They are ready to turn India into a vast English-speaking country, where we, the elite will have to scramble to keep our footing. Where interesting things are going to happen.

It is a basic tenet of modern descriptive linguistics that real languages are far more complex and internally consistent than any grammars we could artificially construct. So, too, the real world is far more complex and self-regulating than any world we could devise. The elite's failure to act does not mean that the society remains in stasis forever. It remains at the same stage of equilibrium until the floodwaters rise and action becomes imperative. Change is not a daily effort of will, but a reluctant one-time response to big ecological changes.

One has seen it all before, in the West Indies, another migration of the Indian poor. A community's inexorable climb towards English, alongside the extinction of all the languages we brought with us from India. And one has seen the end of the process, the transformation of poor Indians into a part of the world middle class. You lose some, but you gain much more.

#### **Footnote:**

1. Stephen Jay Gould proposed the idea of biological evolution as being step-jump landscape with long periods of stasis punctuated by quick flurries of adaptation, brought on by ecological change. This seemed, to him, the best way of accounting for the dearth of missing links in the fossil record: the shortness of the transition periods.

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