Code-mixing with a difference

AYSHA VISWAMOHAN

A look at popular journalism in India

IN RECENT years, the sociolinguistic theory of code-switching and code-mixing has been a source of great interest among scholars worldwide. The phenomenon is common in such multilingual societies as India. Most known cases of code-switching are, however, restricted to the spoken form, in which English is liberally interspersed with such regional languages as Hindi, Marathi, and Telugu. What has not yet significantly caught the attention of scholars is the notion of such switching and mixing in print. This practice is however particularly prevalent among writers in popular magazines, who resort to written code-switching for a variety of reasons. The present paper endeavours to examine the causes of the popularity of this style of writing in the light of some accepted theories of multilingualism.

> 'At the turn of the century Pramatha Chaudhuri, with support from Rabindra Tagore and other major authors, launched a movement to promote the Chalit or informal code as a written standard and to let the *saadhu* or formal code die a natural death. The movement rapidly placed Chalit Bangla [Informal Bengali] in the position of hegemonic power that was sought for it. This socio-linguistic development was one of the most visible aspects of the cultural modernization of Bengal in the twentieth century.'
>
> – Dasgupta 1993:87

That was the Bengali language in the early twentieth century. In the 1970s, however, another interesting trend started to develop: a rebellion against the standardized form of written English in popular journalism. Stifled by the literariness of the language, a couple of journalists decided to write in a way which the mass of English readers in India would identify with, a kind of English which was soon to acquire the name 'Hinglish'. As McArthur has put it (2002:316):

> Despite such differences and difficulties, speakers of the two languages [Hindi and Urdu] manage well on an everyday basis. There is, however, a third element in this intricate situation. Both languages have extensively borrowed from English and hybridize with it in many situations. Many of their users also know English, as a result of which there is a continuum of Hindi-English and Urdu-English… There appears not to be a word for such mixing in Pakistan, but in India the variants *Hindlish* and *Hinglish* are used: casual, humorous, slightly rueful names.

Consider the following samples taken from various recent film magazines. The news items, as would be evident, thrive on exploring the juicy details of the personal lives of Bollywood's gods and goddesses (italics mine):

> **1** Amitabh Bachchan drove down from Nashik on June 3 specially to spend time with *biwi* Jaya on their 30th wedding anniversary. Touching, *na*?
>
> – from *Filmfare*, Aug 03, p.20
> (*biwi* 'wife', *na* 'isn't it')

> **2** Both Amisha and Bunty were openly celebrating their feelings for each other all through the duration of the concerts. And guess who joined in the revelry? Mother Asha Patel, who approves of her *beti*'s new friendship. Back

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home, Vikram Bhatt is said to be nursing a broken heart. *Kyon*? 'Coz he's still carrying a torch for Amisha and the *khabar* of her newfound friendship with Bunty Walia has put him in a blue funk.

– also from *Filmfare*, Aug 03, p.10
(*beti* 'daughter', *kyon* 'why', *khabar* 'news')

3 It's our sprightly, Preity Zinta, who finds it pretty embarrassing to go about strutting her stuff on exotic foreign locales. 'Can you imagine what we look like when, in the middle of a posh street in London or Australia, we burst into a song and start dancing to our *tapori* numbers? I've seen the *firangs* looking zapped!'

– from *Showtime*, Feb 03, p.11
(*tapori* 'streetwise', *firangs* 'whites, westerners': a kind of 'writing back', in which whites are called *firangs*, a rather dismissive term)

[*Firang*: a variant of a widespread West, South, and South-East Asian term based on *Frank*, a medieval name for the French, that came to be loosely applied to western Europeans during and after the Crusades. Persian *farangi* refers to any person or thing that is foreign; the Turkish form is *ferengi*.]

4 Bored to death with the saccharine sweet, scrappy *saas-bahu* relationships on TV? Here's something *hatke* to relieve you of the monotony. In our star *parivar*, for a change, the main protagonists aren't squabbling and scheming women but two stars. One, a blast from the past, and one just a blast! Rajesh Khanna and son-in-law Akshay Kumar, who else? The *sasur-damaad jodi* apparently get along famously with each other.

– from *Stardust*, Sep 03, p.62
(*saas-bahu* 'mother-in-law/daughter-in-law', *hatke* 'off-beat', *parivar* 'family', *sasur-damaad jodi* 'father-in-law and son-in-law as a pair')

5 The *janta* was also curious to see in what *andaaz* the girls dressed. Lara came in glamorously clad, while Priyanka stuck to her new dress-code of showing little skin.

– from *Filmfare*, Oct 03, p.32
(*janta* 'public', *andaaz* 'style', here a pun, *Andaaz* being the name of a film starring the two actresses being discussed)

It is necessary to mention here that all the above mentioned magazines transcend age and sex barriers. They are the kind of magazines that can be found on the coffee-tables of most middle and upper middle-class homes of urban India. They are also some of the most elitist magazines in the land. The switch from English to Hindi, therefore, is not due to some inability or inarticulacy on the part of the writers or the readers. This is in contrast to the code-switching in spoken English which is resorted to (a) exclude certain persons from a portion of the conversation, and (b) indicate a change in the 'tone' of the conversation at a certain point, or signal the introduction of a subject more formal than what had been under discussion (cf. Scotton as quoted in Ashok Kumar's *Bilingual Contexts: A Case of Hindi and English*, Gurukul Publications: Lucknow, 1995, p.121.)

In the written form of code-switching from English to Hindi, on the other hand, we witness a trend exactly opposite to the spoken form. The supposed indigenization of the language is aimed to be more 'inclusive' of the readers. A vast majority of readers feel more at ease when Hindi words pop up at regular intervals. Also, the tone decidedly becomes more informal than what had been under discussion. And, though it may sound surprising, code-mixing in popular journalism is also reflective of a near-native-like control over the English language, where the writers feel supremely confident of their linguistic proficiency. So much so, that the style is no longer restricted to cine-journalism. The more serious variety of magazines have also taken to reinventing the language in a rather big way. Let us look at the following examples:

6 Email*wallahs* is a tale of publishing Indian *ishtyle*, complete with pirated Harry Potter editions.

– from *India Today*, 29 Sep 03, p.73
(*ishtyle* an Indianised version of style, used for want of a better Hindi substitute)

7 The emphasis is on self-reliance. The women are not encouraged to regard the government as a mai-baap.

– from *Outlook*, 22 Sep 03, p.18
(*mai-baap* figuratively, 'be-all and end-all', literally 'mother father')

8 For us it is old hat. Or as Ashok K. Banker, master of multilingual wordplay, might say old *topi*.

– *India Today*, 22 Sep 03, p.60
(*topi* 'hat', notably as used in colonial times, used to adapt the idiom *old hat* 'dated')

9 I believe in *karm* not in *fal*.

– from *Business Today*, 28 Sep 03, p. 82
(*karm* 'action', cf. karma; *fal* 'results'. The concept of karm and fal is taken from the holy book the Bhagavad Gita, in which the emphasis is on actions rather than on the consequences of those actions)

10 The 1974 national swimming champion dove into the world of modeling to emerge as

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> Miss India 1976, rode as a jockey, then moved on to films like *Junoon* and now plans to don the *neta topi*.
>
> – from *The Week*, 28 Sep 03, p.56
>
> (*neta topi* 'ministerial cap'. The use of *neta topi* is highly humorous. In India, politicians are associated with a certain style of head gear, which down the ages has been at the receiving end of a great deal of light-hearted banter.)

By means of such code-switching the writers of such texts can do many things, such as be humorous, exhibit wit, engage in irony and euphemism, make puns, translate proverbs, emphasize key points, engage in euphemism, and (very rarely) use a known word or phrase for want of something better. As Khubchandani put it in 1997:

> The verbal repertoire of an individual or a group in a plural society is often characterised by a creative use of speech variation in diverse combinations through linguistic stratifications in everyday life. Diglossic complementation, code-switching, code-mixing, bilingualism, 'grassroots' multilingualism are regarded here as different devices of linguistic stratification of a speech community.'[4]
>
> Indeed, this phenomenon of mixing of languages goes one step ahead of creative use of speech and can almost be regarded as an intentional 'response to cultural colonization.'[5]

Many purists like David Crystal believe 'standard English users in the community may become worried by the spread of a nonstandard variety, especially one which shows a mixture of linguistic influences. Code-mixing takes place to some degree everywhere that English is spoken alongside another language, and is a normal feature of bilingualism… It is unusual to see any of these varieties in writing, but some are very widely spoken. They have received only limited linguistic study.' The field of code-switching in written English makes for a highly interesting and entertaining reading. Also, worth observing would be the repercussions it has on the written as well as spoken English of the target readers, along with the other members of the educated community. It is about time that these varieties receive the necessary linguistic attention. ■

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