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Eloquent Parrots; Mixed Language and the Examples of Hinglish and Rekhti

Ruth Vanita
University of Montana - Missoula, ruth.vanita@umontana.edu

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‘Hinglish’ has become the lingua franca among urban Indians today. Listen closely and you’ll hear Hindi and Urdu peppered with English words and phrases. Likewise, English sentences are spiked with Hindi or Urdu. In fact, many words that used to be well known in Hindi and Urdu have now disappeared from the vocabulary of native speakers, who have switched over to English equivalents. Ruth Vanita uncovers some of the roots of this mixed language phenomenon in the hybridised poetry of rekhti.

Ruth Vanita

MOST URBAN INDIANS TODAY speak variants of a new dialect, sometimes termed ‘Hinglish’. English spoken in non-formal settings tends to be spiced with many Hindi Urdu words, phrases and sentences, while almost all Hindi/Urdu speakers incorporate numerous English words in their speech, not just words like ‘email’, or ‘TV’ but also words like ‘sorry’, ‘tension’ and ‘minute’. Many words that used to be well known in Hindi/Urdu are now almost in comprehensible to native speakers, who have switched over to English equivalents, for example, ‘ball’ now replaces ‘gud’ both in daily speech and in cricket commentary on radio and television. Most TV dramas, comedies and even newscasts that are purportedly both in daily speech and ‘gund’ for example, ‘ball’ now replaces speakers, who have switched over to English equivalents, Hindi/Urdu are now almost incomprehensible to native and ‘minute’. Many words that used to be well known in languages, including Persian, Arabic, Urdu, Turkish, Hindi and Punjabi, and composed both rekhta and rekhti poems.

Rekhti poet’s use of a female persona is closely integrated with their use of a relatively non-Persianised Urdu. Women of upper class Muslim families, especially in the urban centres, were likely to be able to speak some refined or Persianised Urdu, but they would also speak to servants, neighbours and relatives from middle class backgrounds in local languages. fluency in local languages was required to converse with Hindi women, whether vendors, servants or friends.

Under the Islamicate, it was more common for Muslim men to marry Hindu women than for Hindu men to marry Muslim women. Muslim kings, nobles and gentry often married Hindu women. For example, the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, an accomplished poet in Urdu, Persian, Brajbhasa and Punjabi, had a Hindu mother. Many Muslims, both men and women, were recent converts and maintained links with their Hindu kin.

For both Muslim and Hindu elite men who spoke the language of high culture in public, ‘women’s speech’ was the language of their private lives, of emotions and of significant imaginative domains. It was the language of the women servants, both Hindu and Muslim, who raised these men in the women’s quarters before they reached puberty; it was the language of many of their mothers and sisters, family friends and neighbours, cousins, aunts, and wives. It was the language of domesticity and the marketplace, and was often close to the mother tongues of the courtiers and male youths with whom these men might develop liaisons.

While many courtiers were accomplished women, who spoke Persianised Urdu in public, they spoke ‘women’s speech’ in private. Permitted, even expected, to speak more freely of erotic matters, they could spew up literary Urdu with jokes and obscenities that respectfully married women might use among themselves but would not be expected to use in men’s presence. The mixed clientele of the kothas (homes and workplaces of courtesans) also encouraged the use of mixed speech. Rekhti poet Sa’adat Yar Khan, pen-name ‘Rangia’ (Coloursul), 1775-1835, gained him the language of rekhti from khangas, married women who discreetly engaged in prostitution, and thus represented the overlap between normative households and courtiers households.

‘Women’s speech’ was closely related to the languages of villages and small towns, which were also heard in the streets of Delhi and Lucknow. Used in devotional songs, both Hindu and Muslim, and in romances, it was employed to different degrees in the standard Urdu ghazal (love poem).

However, many rekhti poems do not contain either proverbs or exclamatory addresses. They are merely written in less Persianised Urdu than is mainstream rekhta poetry. Conversely, some rekhti poems, such as those of jat, do contain these exclamations.

What then was ‘women’s language’? Was it a code spoken by women that men did not understand? Clearly not. Most rekhti was written by men and not just by a few men privy to a secret language of women but at the height of its popularity, by numerous poets. It was recited at mushairs (poets’ gatherings), and understood by both women and men. (One analogy could be classical Sanskrit dramas, where elite male characters speak Sanskrit while women characters and male servants speak Prakrit, but the male characters do understand Prakrit while the women characters understand Sanskrit.

Educated people in North India were conversant with Persian, the language of royal courts and high culture, but most educated people were multilingual and used more than one script to write Urdu and Persian just as people did with Sanskrit; this tradition continued throughout the 19th century. Many Urdu poets wrote in other languages too; for example, the last king of Avadh, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, wrote in Avadh, Braj, Marwari, Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi and Persian. Major Nizam-indu Allah Khan, who wrote under the name ‘Inshah’ (Elegantly Stylized), 1756-1817, was a polyglot who wrote in several languages, including Persian, Arabic, Urdu, Turkish, Hindi and Punjabi, and composed both rekhta and rekhti poems.

Vanita uncovers some of the roots of the Hindi/Urdu film song is, I have argued elsewhere, rekhti poetry, on which I have now been working for some years. Rekhti is a genre of Urdu poetry, purportedly composed in ‘women’s language’, which arose in the 18th century and came into prominence in the early 19th century. Literary Urdu, called rekhta, has a preponderance of Persian and Arabic vocabulary, but the language of rekhti, which approximates more to the non-literary language of everyday speech, incorporates words and idioms from north Indian languages and dialects.

In rekhti poetry, this supposedly ‘women’s language’ is indistinguishable from colloquial, less Persianised Urdu. Urdu literary critics identify it as ‘women’s idiom’, by which they mean proverbs and sayings used by women, as well as exclamatory forms of address, such as ‘Re’, ‘Haan ri’, and ‘Ha Allah’.

The language of women?

One ancestor of the Hindi/Urdu film song is, I have argued elsewhere, rekhti poetry, on which I have now been working for some years. Rekhti is a genre of Urdu poetry, purportedly composed in ‘women’s language’, which arose in the 18th century and came into prominence in the early 19th century. Literary Urdu, called rekhta, has a preponderance of Persian and Arabic vocabulary, but the language of rekhti, which approximates more to the non-literary language of everyday speech, incorporates words and idioms from north Indian languages and dialects.

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The 2008 Bollywood film ‘Money Hai To Honey Hai’ reflects the current trend for Hinglish.

Fig. 1

The 2008 Bollywood film ‘Money Hai To Honey Hai’ reflects the current trend for Hinglish.

1 One analogy is that of the language used by the female characters in the film ‘Money Hai To Honey Hai’.

English words are infiltrating Hindi sentences:

Time kya hua hai? = What time is it right now?
I have hazaar things to do. = I have thousands of things to do.
A selection of popular Hinglish expressions based on Hindi words:

**badmash** adjective naughty. Also used as a noun (plural badmashes) to refer to a hooligan, an aggressive or violent person.

**changa** adjective fine, great.

**desi (also deshi)** adjective authentic, relating to the idea of national or local as opposed to foreign, e.g. desi food would refer to rice, curry, chapati, etc. Desi pastimes include watching Bollywood movies, listening to Hindi music, going to the temple/ mosque etc.

**filmi** adjective dramatic, characteristic of Bollywood movies.

**haramzada** noun a despicable, obnoxious male. Haramzadi is a female form. Both terms can be used to refer to a man/woman born of unmarried parents.

**jungli** adjective unruly, wild in behaviour.

**yaar** noun friend, used as a familiar or affectionate form of address.

Most of the idioms employed in rekhti and identified by Urdu critics as ‘women’s idioms’ are not at all specific to rekhti. Examples include blessings like ‘bathe in milk and be fruitful of sons’ and curses like ‘aag lagey’ (burn up) or ‘bhaad mein jaye’ (go into the stove). These are also among the idioms that late 19th century Muslim male reformers criticised Muslim women for using. Reformers considered these usages inappropriate because they were unislamic. These idioms are still widely used today.

**Eloquent parrots**

Because Persian was the language of high culture, most Urdu poets composed in Persian as well, and literary Urdu tended to be highly Persianised. Some major poets and many minor ones wrote rekhti as well, which, arguably, had the effect of helping make colloquial Urdu more acceptable in poetry.

Rekht poets, drawing attention to the elegance of their language, emphasised both its non-Persian ambience and its Indic urbaniy. As opposed to later critics who characterise rekht as trivial pornographic entertainment for men, rekhti poet Mir Yar Ali ‘Jan Saheb’ (1817-1896), poets it as the symbol of Lucknow’s high culture. He laments the British massacre of Lucknow’s citizens after the 1857 rebellion, and their destruction of its sophisticated culture:

Jan! You are reading rekht in Lucknow
The nightingale is singing in a ruined garden.3

In another poem, Jan Saheb characterises his language as emblematic of Indic (Hindustani) creativity:

Foreign aunt! You are a nightingale of Shiraz [in Persia]
I am a parrot of Hindustan and my tongue is eloquent...
The wretched native hill crows cry ‘caw, caw’
I will hide my face if they can ever speak my language.4

If the nightingale (bulbul) here stands for Persian poetry, the crow represents the supposedly rustic dialects of semi-educated Indians. Invoking the Indic symbol of the parrot, which has a long ancestry in Indian literatures as a figure of creativity, not mere imitation, this Urdu poet proudly claims that his language is sophisticated as well as specific to his native land.

Jan Saheb writes almost entirely in rekhti. Although he always writes in the female voice, he does not confine himself to conventionally female themes. He addresses a variety of topics, including politics, poetic convention and poetic rivalries.

As nationalist social and religious reform movements developed on the subcontinent in the later 19th century, the lines between Hindus and Muslims hardened. The unfortunate identification of Urdu with Muslims and Hindi with Hindus became institutionalised when, in 1947, India became independent, with Hindi as its national language, and Pakistan was formed as a Muslim state, with Urdu as its national language. While Hindi became increasingly Sanskritised and purged of Persian-based words, Urdu became increasingly Persianised and purged of Sanskrit-based words. Partly as a result of this, rekhti poetry of the early 19th century, with its unashamed hybridity, came to be derided and excised from the canon of Urdu poetry.

Despite the efforts of purists, however, hybrid colloquial modern Urdu/Hindi, or what used to be called Hindustani, with its infusion of words from many other languages, continued to flourish in non-academic and non-governmental domains. Bombay cinema played a central role in disseminating and developing it, as did Hindi popular fiction. The emergence of Hinglish is not, therefore, indicative of a new process but the continuation of an old one – the hybridising of language in urban milieux. It represents the fusion of father tongue and mother tongue, the language of public thought with the language of private emotions and intimacy.

Ruth Vanita
University of Montana
ruth.vanita@umontana.edu

Notes

1. In his history of Urdu, Darya-e-Latifat, poet Insha recounts an anecdote told by a poet to a courtesan, about a famous rekht verse that men and women in Lucknow and Delhi used to recite. Quoted in Azad, Muhammad Husain. 2001. Abe Haya!, translated and edited Frances Pritchett. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

