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

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

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/libstudies_pubs

Part of the South and Southeast Asian Languages and Societies Commons

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation
Vanita, Ruth, "Eloquent Parrots; Mixed Language and the Examples of Hinglish and Rekhti" (2009). Global Humanities and Religions Faculty Publications. 2.
https://scholarworks.umt.edu/libstudies_pubs/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Global Humanities and Religions at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Global Humanities and Religions Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
Eloquent Parrots: Mixed language and the examples of hinglish and rekhti

The Study

The linguistic landscape of modern India is a mixed one, where Hindi, Urdu, and English coexist and influence each other. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as "Hinglish," a term that has become a part of everyday vocabulary in India. Hinglish is the result of English words and phrases being incorporated into Hindi and vice versa, creating a unique blend of languages.

Hinglish has its roots in the colonial period when English was introduced to India. As India moved towards independence, English continued to be used in various settings, such as cinema, radio, and television. This led to the incorporation of English words and phrases into Hindi, creating a new form of language.

One of the most common examples of Hinglish is the use of words like "email," "TV," "sorry," "tension," "minute," etc., in Hindi. Similarly, English words like "Hindustani" for "Hindi" and "Urdu" are now almost incomprehensible to native speakers, who have switched over to English equivalents.

Under the Islamic rule, 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, who was an accomplished poet in Urdu, Persian, Brajbhasha, 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 Muslim and Hindu, 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.

"Women's speech" was the language of domesticity and the marketplace, and was often close to the mother tongues of the courtesans and male youths with whom these men might develop liaisons.

While many courtesans 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 spice up literary Urdu with jokes and obscenities that respectively married women might use among themselves but would not be expected to use in men's presence.

This mixed diction of the kothab (homes and workplaces of courtesans) also encouraged the use of mixed speech. Rekhti poets' 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 Hindu women, whether vendors, servants or friends.

The language of women?

One ancestor of the Hindi/Urdu film song, in I have argued elsewhere, rekhti poetry, on which I have now been working for some years. Rekht 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. It was the language of the women servants, both Muslim and Hindu, 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 courtesans and male youths with whom these men might develop liaisons.

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 (poet's gatherings), and understood by both women and men. One analogy could be classical Sanskrit drama, 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.

Eloquence and Elegance

Mohini Khan, who wrote under the name 'Insha' (Elegantly Stylish), 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.

Rekhti poets' 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 Hindu women, whether vendors, servants or friends.

Under the Islamic rule, 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, who was an accomplished poet in Urdu, Persian, Brajbhasha 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 Muslim and Hindu, 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 courtesans and male youths with whom these men might develop liaisons.

While many courtesans 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 spice up literary Urdu with jokes and obscenities that respectively married women might use among themselves but would not be expected to use in men's presence. The mixed diction of the kothab (homes and workplaces of courtesans) also encouraged the use of mixed speech. Rekhti poets' 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 Hindu women, whether vendors, servants or friends.

The language of women?

One ancestor of the Hindi/Urdu film song, in I have argued elsewhere, rekhti poetry, on which I have now been working for some years. Rekht 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. It was the language of the women servants, both Muslim and Hindu, 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 courtesans and male youths with whom these men might develop liaisons.

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 (poet's gatherings), and understood by both women and men. One analogy could be classical Sanskrit drama, 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 Avadhi, Braj, Marwari, Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi and Persian. Major Urdu poet Insha Allah Khan, who wrote under the name 'Insha' (Elegantly Stylish), 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.

Rekhti poets' 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 Hindu women, whether vendors, servants or friends.

Under the Islamic rule, 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, who was an accomplished poet in Urdu, Persian, Brajbhasha and Punjabi, had a Hindu mother. Many Muslims, both men and women, were recent converts and maintained links with their Hindu kin.
A selection of popular Hindlish expressions based on Hindi words:

- **badmash adjective** naughty. Also used as a noun (plural badmasses) 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 urbancy. As opposed to later critics who characterise rekhti as trivial pornographic entertainment for men, rekhti poet Mir Yar Ali ‘Jan Saheb’ (1817-1896) posits 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 rekhti in Lucknow*

*The nightingale is singing in a ruined garden.*

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 cranes cry ‘oo, oo’...*

*I will hide my face if they can ever speak my language.*

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 rivalry.

**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 Hindlish 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