



From the Minute to the Meme: Code-Switching, Hinglish, and the Digital Refashioning of Indian English

Chitra P. M

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Don Bosco College, Thrissur, Kerala, India

Article information

Received: 10th March 2026

Received in revised form: 22nd April 2026

Accepted: 15th May 2026

Available online: 25th June 2026

Volume: 2

Issue: 2

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63090/IJILRS/3108.1797.0022>

Abstract

This paper traces the evolution of Indian English from the colonial classroom to the digital screen, focusing on the rise of Hinglish and habitual code-switching as defining features of contemporary urban Indian speech. It argues that if Macaulay's Minute of 1835 inaugurated English as an instrument of colonial administration, the digital age has completed a long process of appropriation in which English has become a flexible resource blended freely with Indian languages. Drawing on Braj Kachru's model of concentric circles, the scholarly tradition of code-switching research from Gumperz to Myers-Scotton, and recent work on language and the internet, the study analyses mixed speech across the domains of cinema, advertising, literature, and social media, and surveys the regional mixed codes that extend beyond Hindi. It contends that Hinglish is not a corruption of English but a creative and rule governed practice that expresses a distinctly Indian modern identity, even as it raises persistent questions of class, access, and linguistic justice.

Keywords: - Hinglish, Code-Switching, Indian English, Nativization, Sociolinguistics, Digital Communication, Language Identity, World Englishes.

1. Introduction

When Thomas Babington Macaulay argued in 1835 for an English education in India, he imagined producing a class of interpreters, Indian in blood but English in taste and intellect. He could not have foreseen the language that would actually emerge. Nearly two centuries later, the English spoken in Indian homes, offices, films, and phones bears little resemblance to the standard he envisioned. It is mixed, playful, and unmistakably Indian, woven together with Hindi and a dozen other languages in a continuous fabric of code-switching that this paper calls, following common usage, Hinglish.¹⁰

This study treats Hinglish not as a decline from a pure standard but as the natural endpoint of a long historical process of appropriation. If the colonial period gave India English, the postcolonial and digital periods have allowed Indians to remake it on their own terms. The aim here is to describe this remaking, to ground it in sociolinguistic theory, and to assess what it tells us about identity and inequality in contemporary India. The argument unfolds from the historical backdrop, through the scholarship and grammar of code-switching, across the major domains in which Hinglish lives, and into the debates it provokes.⁹

2. From Colonial Instrument to Indian Resource

The trajectory from Macaulay to the meme can be read as a slow transfer of ownership. Braj Kachru's influential model places India in the outer circle of World Englishes, where English is not a native tongue but a deeply institutionalised second language with its own norms. Kachru argued that Indian English had been nativized, developing distinctive features of pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary that are not errors but established conventions of a legitimate variety.^{1,2}

Nativization adapted English to Indian phonology and syntax, producing retroflex consonants, characteristic intonation, and idioms shaped by Indian languages. It made English an Indian language in its own right, capable of carrying Indian experience. This was the achievement that the previous generation of writers and linguists documented and defended.^{2,8}

Hinglish represents the next stage of this process. Where nativization adapted English internally, code-switching dissolves the boundary between English and Indian languages altogether. The speaker no longer chooses one language over another but draws on both within a single utterance. This shift marks the point at which English ceases to be a foreign acquisition and becomes one resource among several in a flexible multilingual repertoire.⁷

3. A Brief History of Code-Switching Scholarship

The systematic study of code-switching began with the recognition that bilinguals do not simply confuse their languages but alternate between them in patterned ways. Uriel Weinreich's early work on languages in contact opened the field, and John Gumperz later distinguished situational switching, governed by setting and interlocutor, from metaphorical switching, used for rhetorical and expressive effect.³

Subsequent researchers sought the rules that govern where switching can occur. Shana Poplack proposed structural constraints that predict the permissible points of alternation, while Carol Myers-Scotton developed the matrix language frame model, which holds that in any mixed utterance one language supplies the grammatical frame and the other contributes embedded elements. These models established that code-switching is not random but rule governed.^{4,5}

This scholarship is indispensable for understanding Hinglish, which is among the most widespread and visible examples of sustained code-switching in the world. Far from being a careless mixture, Indian mixed speech displays exactly the structural regularities that decades of research have identified, marking it as a competence rather than a deficiency.^{7,8}

4. The Grammar of Code-Switching in Indian Speech

In much Hinglish speech Hindi provides the matrix language, supplying the verbs and the grammatical skeleton, while English contributes nouns, technical terms, and discourse

markers. The relationship can reverse depending on speaker and setting, with English supplying the frame and Hindi the colour, particularly among the urban professional class.^{5,8}

Sociolinguists distinguish code-switching, the alternation between languages across clauses, from code-mixing, the insertion of items from one language into the structure of another. Indian urban speech displays both abundantly, often within a single sentence. Speakers move fluidly between the languages according to topic, emotion, and audience, exploiting the connotations each language carries.⁸

The persistence of grammatical regularity across these mixed forms is the strongest evidence that Hinglish is a competence, a learned and rule governed practice, rather than a failure to master either language. Children acquire it naturally, adults deploy it strategically, and its patterns can be described with precision. To call it broken is to misunderstand its systematic nature.⁸

5. Hinglish in Cinema

Popular cinema has been a powerful engine of Hinglish. Bollywood dialogue and song lyrics have long blended Hindi and English for emotional and comic effect, and film titles themselves increasingly mix the two languages. The screen normalises code-switching as the natural idiom of the aspirational urban Indian, lending it glamour and reach far beyond the metropolitan elite who first practised it.⁷

Film captures the social meaning of switching with great precision. A character may switch to English to signal education or modernity, or to Hindi to signal sincerity or emotional depth. Comedy frequently exploits the gap between the two registers. In this way cinema both reflects and shapes the everyday practice of mixed speech, teaching audiences across the country how and when to switch.⁷

6. Hinglish in Advertising and Branding

Advertising has seized on the same resource. Marketers discovered that a Hinglish slogan can capture both the modern connotations of English and the emotional intimacy of the mother tongue. The result is a commercial language designed to flatter a consumer who is simultaneously global and local, modern and rooted.⁷

In this sphere Hinglish functions less as casual speech than as a carefully engineered tool of persuasion. Brand names, taglines, and campaigns are crafted to exploit the precise associations of each language, demonstrating that mixed speech has become a sophisticated instrument of public communication rather than a private habit.⁷

7. Hinglish in Indian English Literature

The literary dimension is equally striking. Indian writers in English have long drawn on the resources of their other languages, embedding Hindi, Urdu, and regional words and rhythms in their English prose. Salman Rushdie famously described this practice as chutnification, the spicing of English with Indian flavour, and his own exuberant, hybrid sentences exemplify it.⁷

Other writers extend the practice in their own ways. The mixing of registers and tongues allows literature to represent the actual texture of multilingual Indian life, in which speakers move between languages without friction. What in casual speech is spontaneous becomes, in literature, a deliberate aesthetic strategy.⁷

This literary code-switching carries political weight as well. By refusing to keep English pure, these writers assert the legitimacy of an Indian English shaped by Indian languages, continuing on the page the appropriation that began in speech. The novel becomes a site where the ownership of English is quietly but decisively claimed.⁹

8. The Digital Accelerant

The internet has accelerated and transformed the spread of Hinglish. David Crystal observed that digital communication occupies a space between speech and writing, informal and immediate yet textually recorded. In Indian usage this hybrid medium has become the natural home of Hinglish, which flourishes in text messages, social media posts, comment threads, and memes.⁶

Roman script Hindi, written phonetically using the English alphabet, has become a default mode of informal digital writing for millions. This practice frees writers from script barriers and allows seamless mixing of languages within a single line of text. It represents a genuinely new written form, born of the keyboard and the screen.⁶

The meme in particular fuses image, English, and transliterated Indian language into a compact unit of shared humour and identity. What was once a feature of intimate spoken exchange is now a public written practice, archived and circulated at scale. The digital age has thus given Hinglish a permanence and visibility that earlier oral code-switching never possessed, accelerating its spread and entrenching it as a marker of a connected generation.⁶

9. Beyond Hindi: Regional Mixed Codes

Hinglish is the most visible but by no means the only mixed code in India. Every major regional language has produced its own blend with English, popularly named in the same playful spirit. Speakers in the south mix Tamil and English in what is called Tanglish, Malayalam and English in Manglish, and Telugu and English in Tenglish, while Bengali speakers produce their own hybrid forms.⁸

These regional mixed codes follow the same structural principles as Hinglish and serve the same social functions, marking modernity, signalling group identity, and easing communication across language boundaries. Their proliferation shows that the appropriation of English is a pan Indian phenomenon, expressed through the particular resources of each linguistic region rather than through Hindi alone.⁸

10. Identity, Class, and Linguistic Justice

Hinglish is, for many speakers, a marker of a confident modern identity that refuses to choose between the global and the local. It signals belonging to a generation at ease in both worlds. Yet this fluency is unevenly distributed. Command of English, and therefore of the prestigious forms of code-switching, remains stratified by class, region, and access to quality schooling.⁹

The contemporary table below summarises the principal domains in which Hinglish operates and the function it serves in each.

Table 1. Domains and Functions of Hinglish

Domain	Typical Pattern	Primary Function
Cinema	Dialogue and lyric mixing	Aspirational identity
Advertising	Engineered slogans	Persuasion and appeal
Literature	Embedded words and rhythms	Aesthetic and political claim
Social media	Roman script mixing	Informal solidarity
Workplace	English frame, local insertion	Professional register
Education	Variable, contested	Access and mobility

The same ambivalence that the colonial encounter bequeathed to English persists here. Hinglish is at once a democratic, creative idiom and a subtle marker of privilege. Recent policy, including the emphasis on mother tongue instruction in the National Education Policy of 2020, attempts to rebalance the linguistic field, yet parental demand for English shows little sign of weakening. The tension between linguistic justice and economic aspiration remains unresolved.⁹

11. Prescriptivism and the Anxiety of Decay

Hinglish has its critics. Purists on both sides lament it, some fearing for the integrity of English, others for the survival of Indian languages threatened by constant borrowing. Such anxieties echo a long history of prescriptive resistance to language change, in which every new hybrid form is first denounced before being accepted.⁹

The linguistic evidence offers little support for the language of decay. Languages have always borrowed, mixed, and changed, and English itself is the product of centuries of such mixing. Hinglish is best understood not as the corruption of two languages but as the creative product of their contact, a living demonstration that linguistic vitality lies in use rather than in purity.⁸

12. Conclusion

The story that runs from Macaulay's Minute to the contemporary meme is not one of simple imposition or simple resistance. It is a story of appropriation, in which a language introduced as an instrument of control has been progressively reshaped into an instrument of self expression. Hinglish, together with its many regional cousins, is the most vivid evidence of this transformation, a living demonstration that languages belong, in the end, to those who use them.

To dismiss Hinglish as broken English is to misread it entirely. It is a rule governed, socially meaningful, and culturally productive practice that expresses the doubleness of modern Indian life. Macaulay set out to make Indians English. Two centuries later, Indians have instead made English their own, and the digital age has only confirmed the depth and permanence of that achievement.

References

1. Kachru, Braj B. *The Alchemy of English: The Spread, Functions, and Models of Non-Native Englishes*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1986.
2. Kachru, Braj B. *The Indianization of English: The English Language in India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.
3. Gumperz, John J. *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

4. Poplack, Shana. "Sometimes I'll Start a Sentence in Spanish y Termino en Español: Toward a Typology of Code-Switching." *Linguistics* 18, nos. 7–8 (1980): 581–618.
5. Myers-Scotton, Carol. *Duelling Languages: Grammatical Structure in Codeswitching*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.
6. Crystal, David. *Language and the Internet*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
7. Kothari, Rita, and Rupert Snell, eds. *Chutnefying English: The Phenomenon of Hinglish*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2011.
8. Sailaja, Pingali. *Indian English*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009.
9. Pennycook, Alastair. *The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language*. London: Longman, 1994.
10. Macaulay, Thomas Babington. "Minute on Education." In *Selections from Educational Records, Part I*, edited by H. Sharp, 241–251. Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1920.