HINDI IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC OVERVIEW OF ITS STRUCTURE, HISTORY, AND SOCIAL ROLES

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ABSTRACT

Hindi is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world and a central part of linguistic life in India. Yet the word “Hindi” can refer to several different things: a standardised literary language, a group of related spoken varieties, a school subject, and a symbol of national identity. This article offers a sociolinguistic overview of Hindi, focusing on its structure, its historical standardisation, its legal status, and its roles in media and education. It uses a qualitative, literature-based method and draws on published linguistic descriptions, historical studies, official census data, and constitutional provisions; it does not claim to present a new survey or corpus. The discussion shows that Hindi combines Sanskrit-derived, Perso-Arabic, and English vocabulary in different registers, that its modern standard took shape through nineteenth-century debates about script and identity, and that its official status remains a subject of public discussion in a multilingual country. The article argues that Hindi is best understood as a diverse and evolving language rather than a single uniform variety, and that its strength lies in its flexibility across regions and social settings.

Keywords: Hindi; Devanagari; Khari Boli; standardisation; Hindustani; Urdu; language policy; sociolinguistics; India.

INTRODUCTION

Language is not only a tool for exchanging information. It is also a record of history, a marker of belonging, and a subject of public debate. Few languages show this more clearly than Hindi. In the 2011 Census of India, 528,347,193 people, or 43.63 per cent of the population, returned Hindi as their mother tongue (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2018). This makes Hindi the most widely reported mother tongue in the country, and it is also used as a second or additional language by many people whose first language is different.

However, the census figure needs careful interpretation. The category “Hindi” in the census covers a large group of related mother tongues, including varieties such as Bhojpuri, Rajasthani, Chhattisgarhi, and Haryanvi. Speakers of these varieties may use them at home and

learn standard Hindi at school or through the media. For this reason, “Hindi” is both a linguistic category and a social one, and its meaning changes depending on who uses the word and for what purpose.

This article asks three questions. What are the main structural and lexical features of Hindi? How did modern standard Hindi develop, and how is it related to Urdu? What roles does Hindi play in law, education, media, and everyday communication? The article first clarifies the concept of Hindi, then describes its linguistic features and history, and finally discusses its public roles and social meanings.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND: WHAT IS “HINDI”?

Hindi belongs to the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European language family. It developed from earlier Indo-Aryan languages, including Sanskrit and the later Prakrit and Apabhramsha stages, and it is closely related to many languages of northern and central India (Masica, 1991). Modern standard Hindi is based mainly on Khari Boli, a spoken variety of the Delhi–Meerut region, and is written in the Devanagari script (King, 1994; Kachru, 2006).

The term Hindustani is also important. It is often used for the shared colloquial language of northern India, which is understood by speakers of both Hindi and Urdu. Standard Hindi and Urdu share most of their basic grammar and everyday vocabulary, but they differ in script, in the sources of their formal vocabulary, and in cultural associations. Standard Hindi draws heavily on Sanskrit for formal and technical terms, whereas Urdu draws more on Persian and Arabic (Kachru, 2006; King, 1994).

A further complication is the relationship between standard Hindi and the regional varieties around it. Languages such as Awadhi, Braj, and Bhojpuri have their own literary and oral traditions. Whether they should be called dialects of Hindi or separate languages is a question with social and political dimensions, and it is one reason why speaker numbers for Hindi are difficult to interpret.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The article adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretive approach. It is a desk-based study of published work on the structure and history of Hindi, on the Hindi–Urdu relationship, and on language policy in India. The sources include a reference grammar of Hindi, studies of the nineteenth-century Hindi movement, official census data, and the language provisions of the Constitution of India.

The discussion is organised around three themes: linguistic form, historical standardisation, and social use. Illustrative examples are Romanised and are constructed to explain common patterns; they are not quotations from particular books, films, or speakers. The article does not independently measure how often particular forms are used and therefore makes no numerical claims beyond the official census figures cited. A future empirical study could examine a clearly defined corpus of news texts, film dialogue, or social media posts using a transparent coding procedure.

LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF HINDI

Hindi is written in Devanagari, a script in which each consonant symbol carries an inherent vowel and other vowels are shown by attached signs. Writing runs from left to right (Kachru,

2006). Hindi also has sound contrasts that are typical of many South Asian languages, including the difference between aspirated and unaspirated consonants and between retroflex and dental consonants (Masica, 1991).

In grammar, the usual word order is subject–object–verb, and Hindi uses postpositions that follow the noun rather than prepositions that precede it. Nouns are masculine or feminine, and verbs agree with them in gender and number. For example, a male speaker says “Main kitaab padhta hoon” (“I read books”), while a female speaker says “Main kitaab padhti hoon.” In the perfective tense of transitive verbs, Hindi shows a pattern known as split ergativity: in “Maine kitaab padhi” (“I read the book”), the verb agrees with the feminine noun kitaab rather than with the subject (Masica, 1991; Kachru, 2006). Hindi also makes frequent use of compound verbs, as in “Usne patra likh diya” (“He or she wrote the letter [and finished it]”), where the second verb adds a meaning of completion.

Politeness is built into the pronoun system. Speakers choose among three forms of “you”: tu, tum, and aap. Their use depends on closeness, age, and respect, as in “Tu kaisa hai?”, “Tum kaise ho?”, and “Aap kaise hain?” (all meaning “How are you?” with different degrees of intimacy and respect). Choosing the wrong form can sound too distant or too familiar, so this system is an important part of sociolinguistic competence.

The vocabulary of Hindi has several layers. There are words inherited from Sanskrit, words of Persian and Arabic origin, and a growing number of English words. Many concepts can be expressed through more than one layer, for example samay and waqt (“time”), or jeevan and zindagi (“life”). The first word in each pair is of Sanskrit origin and the second of Perso-Arabic origin. The choice depends on register, topic, and audience. Kachru (2006) notes that Hindi has taken in features of Arabic, Persian, and English in different functional styles, which helps explain why the language can sound quite different in a news bulletin, a poem, and a conversation among friends.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND STANDARDISATION

Standard Hindi in its present form is a relatively modern development. Earlier literary and devotional traditions in northern India often used regional varieties such as Braj and Awadhi. The use of Khari Boli as a medium for prose and public communication expanded greatly in the nineteenth century, a period when questions of script, vocabulary, and community identity became closely connected.

King (1994) analyses this process as the Hindi movement of nineteenth-century North India. His study shows that Hindi and Urdu developed from one spoken source, Khari Boli, and that their separation was shaped by script and vocabulary, by religious and political motives, and by inconsistent British language policies that supported Hindi in education and Urdu in administration. One important step was a government decision in 1900 that favoured Hindi and the Nagari script in official use in parts of North India. King interprets the movement as an expression of Hindu nationalism. Other scholars discuss the relationship between language, religion, and nationalism in a more differentiated way. Dalmia (1997) studies the writer Bhāratendu Hariśchandra to show the links between politics, language, culture, religion, and nationality in nineteenth-century Banaras, while Rai (2001) argues that Hindi nationalism is related to, but not identical with, Hindu nationalism.

As a result of these developments, Hindi and Urdu are often treated as two separate languages in education, literature, and official life, even though the spoken forms used in daily conversation overlap heavily. This history shows that the boundaries between languages are not determined only by linguistic structure. Script, institutions, and social identity also influence how a language is defined.

OFFICIAL STATUS, EDUCATION, AND PUBLIC LIFE

After independence, the Constitution of India (1950) gave Hindi in the Devanagari script the status of official language of the Union under Article 343. The same article allowed English to continue for official purposes for a transitional period, and the Official Languages Act of 1963 later provided for the continued use of English alongside Hindi (Government of India, 1963). Article 351 gives the Union a duty to promote the spread of Hindi and to enrich its vocabulary by drawing primarily on Sanskrit and secondarily on other languages (Government of India, 1950). Hindi is also one of the 22 languages listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2018).

Because India is a multilingual country, the status of Hindi has repeatedly been discussed, especially in regions where other languages are dominant. Supporters of wider use of Hindi emphasise its role as a common language across many states and its value for national communication. Others stress the equal standing of other Indian languages and the continuing importance of English in higher education, business, and international contact. These debates show that language policy involves practical communication as well as questions of fairness and identity.

In education, Hindi is taught as a first language in many Hindi-speaking regions and as an additional language in many schools elsewhere. Rai (2001) uses the term “School Hindi” for the standardised textbook form taught in schools, which differs from the local spoken forms of many students and becomes, for them, almost another school subject. The formal register of official documents, with its many Sanskrit-derived terms, can likewise feel distant from everyday speech. This gap makes it important to teach students both the standard forms they need for academic and official purposes and the colloquial forms used in daily life.

HINDI IN MEDIA AND DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

Hindi-language cinema, television, music, and news broadcasting have carried the language to audiences far beyond the Hindi-speaking states and outside India. The language of films and songs is usually closer to colloquial Hindustani than to the formal register of official texts, and it often combines Urdu-origin, Sanskrit-origin, and English words. Because film language is scripted, it should not be treated as a direct record of ordinary speech; nevertheless, it makes certain expressions familiar to large audiences and can support informal language learning.

Digital communication has added new spaces for Hindi. Devanagari is now widely supported on computers and mobile devices, and users write Hindi in Devanagari, in Roman script, or in a mixture of both. As noted in studies of language and script, the Roman alphabet alone does not change the language being written; what matters is the vocabulary and grammar that are used. Online platforms allow news, video, and informal conversation to be produced in

Hindi by ordinary users as well as institutions. The frequent mixing of Hindi and English in these spaces is a separate topic that deserves its own study.

For learners of Hindi as a foreign language, including university students in Central Asia, these media offer valuable exposure. At the same time, learners need guidance in recognising differences between formal, colloquial, and media registers so that they can choose suitable forms for different situations.

SOCIOLINGUISTIC FUNCTIONS AND SOCIAL MEANINGS

National and regional identity: For many speakers, Hindi is a symbol of belonging to a wider community across northern and central India. For others, regional varieties or other languages are the main markers of identity, and Hindi is an additional language used for school, work, or communication across regions. The meaning of Hindi therefore depends on the speaker's background and the situation.

Register and formality: Sanskrit-derived vocabulary is often associated with formal, literary, or official language, while Perso-Arabic and English vocabulary is common in conversation, film, and poetry. The tu–tum–aap system adds another layer of social meaning by showing closeness or respect. Moving between these resources is part of what it means to speak Hindi competently.

Education and literacy: Standard Hindi is a medium of instruction and a school subject, and it provides access to textbooks, newspapers, and official information. Access to the standard form can therefore affect educational opportunities, particularly for speakers of regional varieties that are grouped under Hindi in the census.

Culture and creativity: Hindi has a long tradition of poetry, prose, theatre, and film. Writers and speakers use puns, borrowed words, and shifts between registers to create humour, emphasis, and emotion. This creativity shows that Hindi is a living language that continues to change.

DISCUSSION: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The literature reviewed here suggests that Hindi has several strengths. It has a very large speaker base, a rich literary heritage, a flexible vocabulary that draws on several sources, and a strong presence in cinema, broadcasting, and digital media. Its grammar and writing system are well described in reference works, which supports teaching and research (Kachru, 2006). These strengths create opportunities for education, cultural exchange, and international interest in the language.

There are also challenges. First, the standard language is not the home variety of many people counted as Hindi speakers, so educational materials need to take account of linguistic diversity. Second, the difference between formal and colloquial registers can make official language hard to follow. Third, language policy remains sensitive in a multilingual society, and discussion of Hindi should respect the status of other Indian languages. Finally, researchers should avoid generalising from a small number of texts or speakers, because Hindi is used differently across regions, ages, and social groups.

CONCLUSION

This article has presented a sociolinguistic overview of Hindi in contemporary India. It described the structure of the language, including its script, grammar, politeness system, and layered vocabulary. It also showed that modern standard Hindi emerged through nineteenth-century debates about script and identity, that its official status is defined in the Constitution but still discussed in public life, and that media and digital communication give it wide visibility.

Hindi should not be seen as one uniform variety. It is a standard language, a group of related varieties, a school subject, and a symbol, depending on the context. Understanding these different meanings helps explain both the strength of the language and the debates around it. Future research could build on this overview with empirical studies of Hindi in specific domains, such as classroom use, news language, or online communication, based on clearly defined samples.

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