Watchney ka: New Indexicalities of Linguistic Hybridity in South Asian Popular Media

Muhammad Sheeraz¹, Kira Hall²

¹Lecturer, Department of English, International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan
²Associate Professor, Departments of Linguistics and Anthropology, University of Colorado, USA

In the linguistic hierarchy of the Indo-Pak subcontinent, English has enjoyed prestige for several hundred years as an elite postcolonial language. Whereas Sanskrit and Arabic have long been seen as vehicles of spiritual growth and Hindi and Urdu of social growth, English is linked to individual prosperity, particularly in its association with the educated middle classes. While the status of English has never been uncontested, recent years have seen strong insurgency on the part of indigenous languages, particularly Hindi-Urdu, largely as a result of rising indigenous media and strong Indian cinema. Just when language shift to English seems eminent among globalized South Asian youth, popular Indian media is assigning privilege to local languages, particularly Hindi-Urdu. In this paper, we investigate how the blockbuster Hindi reality show Bigg Boss, now in its 7th season, resists language shift by restricting the way its characters, mostly English-speaking elites, practice code-switching between Hindi and English. Although contestants who live in Bigg Boss’s house for one hundred days may use an Anglicized Hindi or ”Hinglish” (a code-mixed style notoriously associated with urban centers such as Mumbai or Delhi), they receive penalties for extended monolingual uses of English that move beyond the lexical or phrasal level, even to the point of dismissal. The present study thus provides an important counterpoint to research that depicts Indian media as furthering the hegemonic ascendency of English. More critically, it points to a new mass-mediated prioritization of linguistic hybridity across the subcontinent. An earlier generation’s valorization of double monolingualism (Heller 2002) intensified the ideological boundaries between Hindi and English as nationalist and globalist, respectively. Yet discourse data from the first six seasons of Bigg Boss suggest that these boundaries are undergoing contestation, with popular media fostering the emergence of hybrid varieties as indexical of a more progressive urban-driven nationalism.

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