

The Potpourri of Language Narrative in the Wake of Globalisation: Code-mixing and Replacement of Words by Memes and Emoticons

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Abstract

In the present scenario, language is fast losing its sheen and purity at the expense of mushrooming social media and globalisation. The latter has no doubt brought the world closer but it has infringed the purity of individual languages. In modern era, the spoken language has assumed a life of its own, rife with peculiar idiosyncrasies and unusual combinations. Propelled by the factors of relentless globalization and urbanisation, a new kind of language-mutant has surfaced in the English-speaking Indian demographic. The availability and knowledge of multiple languages is leading to rampant **code-switching** and **code-mixing**. The words and expressions from a regional language often bleed into the anatomy of English and vice versa. A major reason for the perilous position of contemporary language scenario is the fading glory of indigenous cultures and civilisation in the face of Western systems of dressing, eating, speaking and interacting. Also, in the contemporary times there is excessive use of various kinds of memes and emojis. This is leading to massive deterioration of the language narrative in general. Just as extensive use of artificial intelligence is taking posterity on the path of reduced cognitivity and alertness, similarly substitution of regular words in communication by memes, emoticons and cartoons is gnawing at the very roots of the language ability of humanity. Language is a kind of witchcraft, a science, an organic entity which has grown and evolved with its users. So the question arises: should this invasion on the language narrative be allowed to go unchecked or reined in before it assumes the shape of a hollow, philistine 'language sham'?

Language use is more like a litmus test for what is happening in the wider societies. Where language use changes, there is an underlying social upheaval that may have environmental, economic, or political causes.

--Daniel Nettle, *Vanishing Voices*

Language, a minefield of histories and practices, is often extolled as the carrier of cultures. Human beings are uniquely and naturally endowed with the ability to speak and express themselves. Language is a gift of God to humanity. One of the most astonishing and remarkable feats of humankind, it holds the reflection of its speakers' lives and values. Interestingly, linguists have estimated that around 20, 000 languages were in practice during the time period of 8000 BC (Kraus, 1992). This figure has dropped to 7111 in present times and is declining rapidly.

This is a fragile time. Roughly 40% of languages are now endangered, often with less than 1000 speakers remaining. Meanwhile, just 23 languages account for more than half the world's population.

--Eberhard et al. *Ethnologue*, 2019

Language of a nation or a community is highly instrumental in preserving its heritage and individuality through written and spoken discourses. India is a land of multitudes of not only religions, festivals, communities and ethnicities; it harbours hundreds of languages too. This has been described using many terms such as *melting pot*, *salad bowl* etc. But none of these can capture the essence of Indian multilingualism which is unique and unparalleled.

In modern era, the spoken language has assumed a life of its own, rife with peculiar idiosyncrasies and unusual combinations. The availability and knowledge of multiple languages is leading to rampant *code-switching* and *code-mixing*. The words and expressions from a regional language often bleed into the anatomy of English and vice versa. This phenomenon is especially observed in the current generation which has completely replaced innumerable words from their indigenous language with those from English. In this respect, one does not use the native counterparts of words like 'button', 'bed', 'switch', 'handle', 'cup', etc. In addition to this, there are some other words which are rapidly overpowering the local phraseology in the minds of budding speakers like 'water', 'time', 'walk', 'speech', and numerous others. These examples may seem innocuous and trivial, but these developments are the ones which change the shape and pace of any language. Today most of us are unable to speak our mother-tongue without *code-mixing* with Hindi or English. Most of us speak vernacular language sans its typical and rich vocabulary. Propelled by the factors of relentless globalization and urbanisation, a new kind of language-mutant has surfaced in the English-speaking Indian demographic. They don't speak Hindi or English or Punjabi but an interesting collusion of these which the linguists have succinctly termed as 'Hinglish' or 'Pinglish'.

We can, strange howsoever it may seem, hardly speak our mother tongue in day-to-day affairs without a few substitutions of English words here and there. English is the language of the internet, science and technology, banking and commerce. Where the knowledge of English promises the world to us, the superiority attached to it is taking away our linguistic and cultural

heritage. In this sense, all languages of our nation are in a state of invisible peril. The treasure trove of our indigenous languages is losing its uniqueness and individuality with every finger-click on social media. A major reason for this precarious position of our indigenous languages is the fading glory of our respective cultures and civilisation in the face of Western systems of dressing, eating, speaking and interacting. Our educated youth is aping and fleeing westwards. Our second and third generations overseas hardly find themselves attached in spirit to their country of origin. Their roots are fast snapping. They have mingled completely into the Western culture and style of living.

Also, the indiscriminate use of short forms and acronyms for phrases and expressions in the name of fast-paced life and virtual paucity of time has started an *erosion of sorts* which is undermining the basic human faculty to speak and express in person. Punctuation marks have been done away with. Use of full stop, comma and apostrophe would be a thing of the past soon. People have become over-dependent on features like *spell check* and *predictive text*. The mobile keypad has replaced the pen, and e-messaging has replaced hand-written messages and personalised letters. People have virtually forgotten how to write their regional language. The spoken word stands diluted manifold. Youngsters and teenagers are the worst offenders.

The first emoticon was created by Scott E. Fahlman, a computer scientist at Carnegie Mellon University. Fahlman created a *sideways happy face* by hitting three keys on his computer: a colon, a hyphen, a parenthesis. He had suggested a character sequence for joke-markers “:-)” Fahlman never bothered to trademark his smiley. Over the years, in order to add emotional resonance to dry black and white e-mail texts, plain text emotions metamorphosized into animated and coloured images. Emoji is a Japanese word that means “picture” plus “letter” (moji). Emojis were first introduced in Japanese mobile companies towards the closing years of twentieth century (Gage 2014). They were initially hailed as a novel and interesting method to express one’s emotions. In the contemporary times however, there is rampant use of various kinds of emojis. It is leading to massive deterioration of the language narrative in general. Just as extensive use of artificial intelligence is taking the posterity on the path of reduced cognitivity and alertness, similarly substitution of regular words in communication by emoticons and cartoons is gnawing at the roots of the language ability of humanity. Our language usage is fast deteriorating. We are more prone to spelling and grammatical mistakes than ever before. Ironically, the Oxford English Dictionary *word of the year* was not actually a word, but an emoji: smiley face with tears. Today, *n* number of emoticons are available on the digital platform: icons illustrating almost anything from *thumbs up to folded hands to celebration modes to flags of different countries to a screamy faced cat to a pile of excrement*.

The primal use of the word *meme* can be credited to Richard Dawkins’ *The Selfish Gene* (1976). Dawkins called it a *mimeme* which means *imitation* in Greek. The word was later abbreviated to *meme* (Gavin 2018). Dawkins coined the term to figure out how ideas spread and propagated through generations. Memes are concise messages in short text or image format. These are created by remixing and appropriating audio and video content from TV shows and

movies. Memes are commonly used by the internet community to poke fun or vent feelings on various issues. Memes seem to enhance communication but they are regressing the lexis and syntax of the users and mask their laziness to put their feelings and opinions into words. Memes are intended to be hilarious and thought-provoking but weird gestures or facial expressions many times hit hard and create schisms amongst communities and groups. These also are being used by people to create false propaganda or reinforce fake news.

Language is a kind of witchcraft, a science, an organic entity which has grown and evolved with its users. So the question arises: should this invasion on the language narrative be allowed to go unchecked or reined in before it assumes the shape of a hollow, philistine 'language sham'? The exigent need of the hour is for the authorities as well as the citizens to understand the unique value of each and every language and be instrumental in preserving and promoting it. We must act now, or never. Our identity is at stake and the sooner we comprehend this fact, the better.

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