English in film songs from India: an overview

AYSHA IQBAL VISWAMOHAN

Exploring the presence and functions of English lyrics in Bollywood and other Indian films

The early years

'C-a-t, cat. Cat *mane billi*; r-a-t, rat *mane chooha*' went a song from a Hindi film of the fifties (*mane* = 'means', *billi* = '*cat*', *chooha* = 'rat'). The song, enormously popular with Indian youth of that generation, was scoffed at by the then contemporary purists who found it hard to accept such 'blatant' dilution of the Hindi language. This song, like a few more of its times, was merely an exception to the largely acceptable language of songs, then largely a mix of Hindi, Urdu and Persian. English was, thus, used in songs either when it depicted (literally, since songs are acted out as autonomous scenes in Bollywood) a comic actor in a light-hearted situation or a semi-literate character desperate to accommodate to the urban ways of life. A celebrated song from *Gopi*, a Hindi film of the early seventies, goes a step forward with its novel coinage. The hero is a rustic who tries to impress his fellow villagers by dressing up in city (read English) style and sings:

> Gentleman gentleman, gentleman/London *se aaya mein ban-than ke*......
> Yeh dekh mera suita/Yeh dekh mera boota/Yeh dekh mera comba

(*Translation*: 'I'm a debonair gentleman from London. Look at my suit, look at my boots, and look at my comb'). In this article words from English in code-mixed sentences are given in roman script, while Hindi parts are in italics. Song titles and isolated words from whatever language are given in italics, with English glosses in single inverted commas in keeping with linguistic practice.

Consider the use of *suita* for 'suit', *boota* for 'boot' and *comba* instead of 'comb', as examples

of a kind of pidgin English (or early learner-language), here used for comic effect. Another popular song from a seventies Hindi film *Sageena* had a country bumpkin returning to his village after a brief stint in the city (inevitably Bombay). Here is how he addresses the rural folks at home:

> saalaa main to saahab ban gaya/saahab banke kaisa tan gaya
> ye suit mera dekho, ye boot mera dekho/jaise gora koi London ka

(*Translation*: 'Folks, I've turned into a gentleman, and am proud to be so. Notice my suit and boot; I appear like a white man from London').

The song did not just provoke laughter, but also underscored the great urban-rural divide in India. The city is presented as an unattainable and out of reach space to which only the privileged few have any access. Also interesting is the reference to being a 'London returned', suggesting prestige and equating the English language with the city

AYSHA VISWAMOHAN has an MPhil in English Language Teaching from English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India, and a PhD in Drama. She is Associate Professor in English in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Madras, India. Her research and teaching interests include Communication, Drama and Film Studies. She has several papers published in the area of ELT and linguistics. Email: draysha@iitm.ac.in.

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of London. This preoccupation with English being associated with 'London' makes for an interesting reading considering India's history as a former British colony.

A rare instance where we had an entire song in flawless English in a mainstream Hindi film was from the film *Julie* (1975). However, this unorthodox inclusion was justified because the film traced the lives of an Anglo-Indian family settled in Goa, and it is quite normal to have this group of people interacting in fluent English. The song *My heart is beating* was a success among all strata of society. Similarly, a song portraying a drunk Catholic protagonist in a popular film, *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1976), went *My name is Anthony Gonsalves* and then had a bombastic insertion:

> You see the whole country of the system, is juxtapositioned by the haemoglobin in the atmosphere because you are a sophisticated restoration intoxicated by the exuberance of your own verbosity.

However, the above remained an exception rather than the rule for the film industry where English was used in songs for an occasional declaration of love, 'I love you', 'I am in love' or 'I am a disco dancer', the latter variety spawned by the disco wave in India. The eighties were not much different. A comic song from a successful Bollywood film had the following lyrics: *Angrezi mein kehte hain ki* 'I love you' (*Angrezi mein kehte hain ki* = 'In English they say I love you') and then employs a mixed syntax of Hindi phrases ending with an English present participle verb:

> *hum tum par itna* dying/*jitna sea mein paani* lying
> *aakash mein panchhi* flying/ *bhanwara bagiyan*
> *mein ga*ing.

(*Translation:* 'I die for you as much as there is water in the sea; birds in the sky and wasps humming in the gardens').

Also remarkable is the singular instance of code-switching with the –*ing* form along with verbs *die* and *fly*, and the use of the doubly humorous form *ga-ing* for 'singing' (Hindi *ga* = 'to sing'). As a writer rightly observes, 'Bollywood had done its bit in extending the scope of Indian-English. It has over the years spoofed Indian-English usage and in the process added new vocabularies' (John, 2007: 10). Again, these songs marked a departure from the heavy use of an Urdu/Persian laden variety of the Hindustani language, a hallmark of films from the forties through to the seventies.

Globalisation and film songs in India

It is evident that post nineties, the massive exposure to global popular culture through media and satellite television has played a major role in the unabashed and unapologetic use of English in Indian society. In fact so full has been the appropriation of the English language by a section of Indians that it is no longer a language of the 'other'.

The socio-cultural transitions have ensured that English is accepted as a regular mode of communication in songs and no hackles are raised anymore about the so-called purity of lyrics. Evidently, the pronounced use of the English language in media and society has expanded the linguistic repertoire of the film songs, where English seems to seamlessly blend with the rest of the lyrics. In the following section, I attempt to give a brief overview of the song categories in Hindi films (popularly known as Bollywood cinema) where English has registered its presence:

Tragedy

When it comes to portraying tragic feelings or heartbreak, film songs have invariably used a mix of an Urdu-laden variety of Hindi. But a major change in the linguistic and cultural attitude of cinegoers was felt when an emotionally charged song from *Akele hum akele tum* ('I'm lonely; you are lonely'; 1995) made extensive use of English. The lines go as follows: Why did you break my heart? Why did we fall in love? Why did you go away, away...? And nobody doubted the seriousness or the depth of the feelings of the leading man who lip-synced these English lyrics.

Similarly, a song from the recent film *Dev D* (2009) came up with a novel coinage: Emotional *atyachaar* ('torment'), and remained a hit for many weeks. Interestingly, the song depicts a duo named 'Patna ke Presley' (*Patna's Presley*, where Patna is the capital of the Indian state, Bihar). However, the result produced borders more on pathos than humour.

Club and party culture

'I'm the best, I'm the best' went a party song from a film released in 2000 with the chorus agreeing 'Yes, you're the best.' The song was just the beginning in a long line of party songs making liberal use of English, thereby suggesting that English is the accepted language among the party-hopping, elite Indians. More such examples are: 'It's the time to disco' from *Kal ho na ho* (2003); 'Where's the party tonight?' (*Kabhi Alvida na kehna*; 2006), and 'Tandoori Nights' (*Karz*; 2008).

The most famous of such party songs is from a successful Bollywood film *Om Shanti Om* (2007) where a host of A-list stars swing to the rhythms of 'All cool boys come and make some noise . . . All hot girls put your hands in the air', as they attempt to play on the 'happening' terms, such as 'cool' and 'hot'. Another song from a mainstream Bollywood film, *Krazzy 4* (2007), gives a clear indication of the trend of code-mixing in Hindi songs. Here is a sample of the opening lines of the title track from the film, with translation in italics: break free gotta get some *chutti/*break free *ab kholo mutthi* ['let's break free, we need a break/ break free open your fists'; *chutti* = 'a break', *mutthi* = 'fist']. Clearly what makes the song work is the abandon with which it mixes codes. And this is far removed from the learner variety of English we witnessed in the yesteryear songs. This song, like the one from *Dhoom 2* discussed below, is also noteworthy because of the choice of the English words, such as *break free, mild, soul, mess, cool, rule, faze, prove, groove, style, swing, do your thing*, etc., something which would have been unthinkable a decade ago. The lyrics demonstrate how English has become deeply embedded in the collective conscious of the film-goers and its whole-hearted acceptance in the popular culture.

Youth and pop culture

As discussed above, English is widely associated with the language of the youth in India today. A decade ago Tom McArthur (2002: 312) stated that in India 'there may well be c. 100–200 million people using the language regularly, including young people nationwide with a creative and slangy style of their own'. This style has not been ignored by the songwriters, as the examples below show:

1. 'Oh yeah, this is the thing, do you know what I mean . . . what's up this big snoop dog/represents the Punjabi (*Singh is King*, 2008, a rap song where Snoop Dogg matches steps with a Bollywood star)
2. 'It's rocking yaara kabhi ishq to karo' (*Kya Love Story hai*, 2007)
3. 'Lose control' (*Rang de basanti*, 2006)
4. 'Pappu can't dance *saala' (Jaane tu ya jaane na*, 2008)

However, the most noteworthy song from this genre is undoubtedly from *Rock on* (2008), a film about a group of rock musicians. It famously goes as:

Meri laundry *ka ek* bill /*Ek aadhi padi* novel,
Ek ladki ka phone number/*Mere kaam ka ek* paper

[Translation: 'a laundry bill of mine/a half-finished novel/ a girl's phone number/ an important paper of mine']

The unique code-mixing gave the required edge to the rock songs of the film, and contributed in a large way to the success of the songs and the film.

Seduction and romance

That English is considered a language of seduction and romance is amply illustrated with the number of songs using the language for this genre. Apparently songwriters associate the English language with greater lack of inhibitions and expression of more intimacy. Thus, we get:

5. 'In the night, no control' (*Khiladiyon ka Khiladi*, 1996)
6. 'Zara zara touch me touch me' (*Race*, 2007) (*zara* = 'a bit')
7. 'Sexy lady/makes me crazy' (*Race*, 2007)

Caper and heist

Kaante (2003), Bollywood's take on Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*, had a foot tapping song 'Dollar *bhi mangta/ yeh* pound *bhi mangta/ soney ke sikkon ki/ yeh* sound *bhi mangta'* ('He wants dollars and he wants pounds/ He likes the sound of gold coins too'). The lyricist perhaps felt that in these swiftly changing times, English is better-suited to convey the extent of greed of the materialistic lead characters. Likewise, in *Bluffmaster* (2005), the protagonist — a con artist from Mumbai — sings 'Right here, right now' declaring the materialistic urgencies of our times.

The title track of *Dhoom 2*, a 2006 caper film, (*dhoom* = 'to freak out') has an entire track from English where the protagonists shift their spatial locales between Mumbai and Brazil. Another popular song from *Dhoom 2* is *Crazy kiya re* ('you've driven me crazy'), with its innovative blend of Hindi and English. The same film had the hero's sidekick wooing the leading lady with 'My name is Ali. . .excuse me to please,' a populist song tailored to appeal to the masses. The humour which is reminiscent of earlier Bollywood songs (as discussed above) may be lost on this section of the audience. However, with the increase of English in all genres of film songs, there has been an overall decline in the use of English for comic effect. The forces of globalisation have ensured, in many ways, the status of English as the lingua franca. Moreover, the acceptance of English in diverse situations contributes to 'legitimating the hegemony of English' (Graddol, 2006: 117).

English in songs from Tamil films

Not just Hindi, but films from regional languages from India are fast adapting to the trend of code-switching as well. In Tamil, a major language of south India for example, a popular song of 1993 used the lines 'take it easy policy' as a refrain; and yet another song from a 1997 film went 'Mustafa Mustafa, don't worry Mustafa; *hum hain tumhare* Mustafa' (*hum hain tumhare Mustafa* = 'We belong to you, O Mustafa'), lyrics which sound catchy but do not make much sense, except as the added value of lines from two prestige languages (English and Hindi), in addition to the Tamil lyrics.

Boys (2003), a film about a group of boys in their late teens aspiring to establish a music band in the metropolis of Chennai, heavily relied on the use of the English language to up its 'cool quotient'. A song with a group of teenagers had lyrics as 'D-a-t-i-n-g; dating is a fantasy'; and yet another rock song went: 'We are the boys … To be a star/ We'll show you how/Reach for the skies and/Never Never give it up/we wake it … just take it.' The film, with dialogues and songs saturated with the American variety of English, became a rage with the younger population of Tamil Nadu.

The influence of language is so far-reaching that a sizeable chunk of films are also named in English: starting from *Gentleman* to *Run* to *12 B*. An idea of the extent of the sway of English over Tamil music is obvious from the fact that the only popular club song in Tamil without using English in the last decade was *Thoodhu varuma* ('Come and touch me') in *Kaakha Kaakha* ('To Protect') and this was because the lyricist took a policy decision to avoid English words.

In a few cases the use of English is not only justified, it is essential to bring out a side of the character's persona. For example, in the movie *Anniyan* (2005), the supposedly 'more assertive' of the split personality of the protagonist is trying to woo the girl with whatever English he has. The song brings out the contrast between the alternate personalities: the 'Pure Tamil' speaking, *sloka* (religious verses) chanting, orthodox Brahmin and the '*Ramp Boy*' Remo. The lyrics border on the banal:

Kannum Kannum Nokia/*Kollai kollum* mafia,
Cappuccino coffeeya/Sofia

[Translation: 'The eyes are *Nokia*/the robbers are *mafia*/The coffee is *cappuccino*/*Sofia*']

In popular Tamil music, this becomes an attempt at either satisfying the sense of elitism among the minority who know English, or a fuelling of the inferiority complex of the majority who do not, but idolise the ones who do. It is ironic that this influence has been the most pervasive in Tamil Nadu, where an entire political ideology has grown and flourished for so long projecting the Tamil language as the fundamental identity of the people.

Conclusion

It is hardly surprising that given the profusion of English words in daily use in many Indian languages, it appears so forcefully in mass media including film songs. In quite a few cases, the right word in the lyrics is definitely more desirable in English owing to the absence of a suitable alternative in the local language. In such a situation the use of English words is not only ideal, but imperative to maintain the natural flow of the song. But also abundant are situations where arbitrary words in English are squeezed into the lyrics serving little purpose but to capitalise on the popularity of the English language. Here the medium is the message. The overdose of English words is also prevalent in other regional Indian languages. Liberal sprinkling of English is found in music videos, private albums and the Punjabi rap songs as well, while some songs from Indian films are entirely in the English language. This use of English shows the increasing urban setting of Indian films, even ones using regional languages. Indian filmmakers are also making strident efforts to globally market their products and the increasing use of the English language could be seen as one of the strategies to gain popularity with the second generation of Indians settled in English-speaking countries (see Crystal, 1997: 8).

It is inevitable that in the era of globalisation intercultural interactions bring about new additions to language and culture in post-liberalised Indian society. As 'Code-mixing takes place to some degree everywhere that English is spoken alongside another language, and is a normal feature of bilingualism' (Crystal, 1995: 115), a comprehensive study of popular culture presents us with accurate trends about language in society.

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