

# The language I love or my love language?

By Kanika Verma, Canada

कोस-कोस पर बदले पानी, चार कोस पर वाणी (Kos-kos par badle paani, chaar kos par vaani). The English translation of this famous Hindi idiom is: In India, the taste of water changes after every mile & language after every four miles. This rhyming poetic aphorism reflects the diversity of languages and dialects in India (Narayan, 2017), where citizens experience multilingualism almost unconsciously in their daily lives. I was born and raised in India, a country of 22 scheduled languages with official status (not including English), around 400 languages spoken by a million or more people each (Gopinath, 2023), and thousands of recognized dialects and identified mother tongues. Most children are multilingual before beginning primary school, learning one language—their mother tongue—at home (mostly Hindi or their state’s official language), one or more in the surrounding community, i.e. a language with a national presence (Hindi or English), and then a third or even fourth as a school language, a medium of instruction (mostly English). Contrary to the common misconception, there is no language called Indian; there are several Indian languages or languages spoken in India, such as Hindi, Bengali, Punjabi, Marathi, Gujarati, Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, and Oriya. Alongside Hindi, English is the lingua franca of this country with the largest population in the world. This narrative essay is an attempt to share my linguistic journey that started in India and figure out my love language, the language in which I am comfortable expressing love.

Since childhood, I had a fascination for languages. I grew up in a multilingual household, as my father’s first language is Hindi, my mother’s first language is Punjabi, and my late paternal grandparents’ first language was Haryanvi (a dialect of Hindi). English was the medium of instruction in my K–12 convent school, set up by a British woman in 1914 before India’s independence from the UK. So, I grew up speaking these four languages simultaneously, tilting more towards Hindi and English. I also comfortably understand Urdu and some street dialects of Hindi. Although I performed well in maths and sciences in school, I realized I was naturally drawn to languages, literature, and artistic expression in literary texts. I would take delight and pleasure in reading stories, novels, and poetry, both in Hindi and English. I remember learning some Sanskrit and French in my middle and high school years, but I did not retain them because of a lack of practice in conversational exchange.



The urban socio-cultural environment I grew up in, in New Delhi, India's capital, privileged English-speaking people in several aspects. I agree that "in the modern world, monolingualism is not a strength but a handicap" (Crystal, 2006, p. 409). The Anglophone sections of the Indian population are treated with respect and favouritism and are perceived to be more cultured, educated, knowledgeable, elite, and even rich. I started speaking and learning English in kindergarten. My entire education has been in English-medium schools and universities. Despite a common assumption that English is widely spoken in India, it has been estimated that about two-thirds of Indians are below the A1 (basic) level of proficiency (Graddol, 2010). Even people educated in English-medium in India who speak good Indian English (Gopinath, 2023) code-mesh (Young, 2010) frequently. For example, in my everyday linguistic journey, I code-mesh using Hinglish effortlessly and smoothly. Hinglish, code-switching and translanguaging between Hindi and English, is spoken by upwards of 350 million people in urban areas of India and is also the fastest-growing language of India. It has now become the lingua franca of India's young urban middle class, and more people are fluent in Hinglish than they are in English (Nordquist, 2018). I took pride in being able to confidently communicate in English as I navigated my everyday life in India. The language we take for granted growing up is our first language because we have a love-hate relationship with it. At my K-12 school, we were discouraged from using Hindi or any other Indian language; we were even looked down upon if we did so. But I never completely left Hindi, even after emigrating from India. For several million in urban India, using Hinglish is not a choice—they cannot speak monolingual Hindi, nor monolingual English (Nordquist, 2018). I am the same when I converse with my family or friends from India. However, I spoke monolingual English at school and work when I lived in the US for nine years after moving out of India in my mid-20s. Now, I speak monolingual English at work as I live in Canada. If I had moved to the US/Canada in my teenage years or earlier, I would have lost my mother tongue, Hindi. When I interact with people in the US or Canada who left India when they were kids, I observe that they have nearly lost their Indian first language. They can understand their mother tongue, but they are uncomfortable speaking it. They can also not read and write in their first language anymore. However, I kept my Hinglish active by continuing to use it in everyday conversations with family and friends and my Hindi alive by practicing it in my literary art. मैंने हन्दि का साथ कभी नहीं छोड़ा, हन्दि ने मेरा हाथ कभी नहीं छोड़ा. I wrote this poetic verse in Hindi which loosely translates into English as: I never left Hindi's company, Hindi never left my hand. Hindi and I supported each other all along, even after migrating out of India for good. So, I consider languages as living entities; they are alive if you keep watering and nurturing them.

At times, my acquaintances in India would write to me in my social media inboxes, "Oh, you wear Western short dresses and skirts in North America and write Hindi poetry." If you are a literary scholar in Hindi (or any Indian language), you are expected to wear traditional Indian attire, such as a saree or salwar-kameez

for women. So, people ascribe dressing sense to language too, just like they would ascribe skin colour to language. Weird! If I wear short Western dresses living in North America, I should be writing English poetry, not Hindi. There are several theories about connecting clothing with communication, but how can a woman in a Western skirt and blouse write and recite poetry in Hindi? It upsets many cultural gatekeepers in India. I have been writing and publishing poetry for more than ten years. After experimenting with writing poetry in Hindi, English, and Punjabi for a while, I realized that I express myself well in Hindi in the artistic plane. The benefit of multilingualism in practicing any literary art is that you can educate yourself in a new culture and literature through its language. To write poetry, it is important to read poetry, in abundance. Although I prolifically write poems in Hindi now, I still enjoy reading poetry in English, Punjabi, and Urdu. This enriches my vocabulary in a multilinguistic context and helps me code-mesh in expression which is still Hindi-dominant but widely accepted in today's versatile poetic landscape in India. It equips me with more colours to paint my poetic canvas with. This would be an example of additive multilingualism at an individual level, just like in India at the country level. "The difference between additive and subtractive multilingualism, whether it is in the individual, the community or the country, lies in the nature of the dynamics of change in the functional relation between the languages in the repertoire and in the direction of change, whether it is unilateral or multilateral, with regard to hierarchy in the network" (Annamalai, 2003, p. 114). Considering Annamalai's suggestion on a positive note, I might start writing poetry in Punjabi again depending on several other variables like my everyday practice of the language, motivation in my surroundings, continuation of my reading in Punjabi, etc. I connect this with Annamalai's (2003) point about the structural relationship significant to multilingualism which he articulated as "the majority versus minority relation, which derives from the size of the population and/or extent of the power of the speakers of the languages" (p. 115). After moving to Brampton, a city in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) of Canada with a majority Punjabi immigrant population from north India, five years ago, there has been a significant improvement in my Punjabi vocabulary, accent, pronunciation, and contextual meaning comprehension. Who would have thought I would become better and more confident in another Indian language after moving to Canada? This is one of the effects of globalization and the dominance of Punjabi-speaking immigrants from the north Indian state of Punjab in Canada. We learn language in exchange. I could improve my Punjabi largely because of the majority factor discussed by Annamalai (2003). Applying multilingualism to my experience in poetry writing, I agree with Annamalai (2003) that "every language is an asset in different ways and no language is a liability" (p. 117).

Living in English-speaking countries (the USA and Canada) for over 15 years now, I have never faced any real linguicism probably because I am confident about my English language skills, and I consider English to be my co-L1 along with Hindi. Though, a couple of times, a few people have rhetorically asked me, "Oh, you look brown, you speak good English?" or "You are from India, how do you speak such good English?"



You may want to consider this as subtle linguistic discrimination! I still pronounce several English words in an Indian accent. In my personal experiences and interactions with people from all over the world in the US and Canada, I have seen people (with various L1 backgrounds) fearing and traumatized by English, just because they have to go through rigorous language eligibility tests (such as IELTS) for their permanent residency or citizenship. Several people think of themselves as worthless or unprivileged just because they are not fluent or proficient in English. This hurts me. My father, who cannot speak good English, used to tell me that the purpose of any language is to get your message across. I used to correct, and even mock, his English pronunciation growing up, but he would still be confident travelling and navigating the world with his broken, raw, and Indian English. Today, being an ESL (English as a Second Language) and EAP (English for Academic Purposes) instructor for more than six years, I empathize with my parents and many others in their shoes who are not proficient in English or any other foreign or additional language but still keep trying and ultimately make it big in their lives.

I have been translanguaging, code-switching, and code-meshing all my life, even when I did not know the meaning of these terms. I write in English for my professional pursuits and in Hindi for my creative passion. Today, Hindi and English are my Yin and Yang. If one is my sun, the other is my moon. I cannot imagine my being without either. I love both these languages. Both are also my love languages, in which I freely and passionately express love.

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#### Author Bio

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Dr. Kanika Verma is a Lecturer in Writing Studies at the University of Toronto Mississauga with teaching and research experience in English as a Second Language, English for Academic Purposes, active learning, and higher education. With more than 12 years of experience in education, she has received 15 awards and several other recognitions for her research, teaching, and service. She has authored/co-authored (peer-reviewed) five journal articles, three book chapters, and one e-book.

