'I am *tho* speaking English *only*': Delineating English and Non-English in India

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S: What's your first language?
T: Well, Dad is from Punjab, and I speak with him in Punjabi. Or sometimes English
S: Ok, so would you say Punjabi was your first language?
T: But Mum is Marathi, and Dadi [Grandma] speaks with me in Marathi too.
S: So maybe Marathi and Punjabi?
T: Yes but I'm more comfortable with my friends in Gujarati.
S: So that's three first languages!
T: Yeah, so maybe I have three (pause). Wait! English bhi hai *[English is there too!]*

Introduction

In 2012 I moved to Gujarat, India, with the intention of teaching for a year. Last September, almost five years after I had first set foot in the country, I finally moved back to the UK. The reasons I stayed are numerous – occasionally bordering on cliché – but from the first few weeks of my job teaching English and French, I was fascinated by the ways in which my students and colleagues negotiated the various languages they spoke. The linguistic make-up of the country, and even the individual speakers I interacted with on a daily basis, fascinated me so much that it became the subject of my Master's dissertations, and my current PhD research area grew from questions that still remained unanswered. Having grown up monolingual (until my late teens) in a small village outside Liverpool, where the vast majority of my schoolmates were also monolingual, seeing students in the school in India as young as four years old navigate three or four languages, sometimes in a single breath, was utterly astounding. The conversation above, cited from memory, is a retelling of an exchange I had with a young multilingual student, for whom - like many others – the question of 'first language' was all but easy to answer.

In the prestigious international school in which I worked, the main language of study and communication was English. It is common for such schools to implement stringent rules that forbid the use of languages other than English in the classroom, and often even at all times on campus (with the obvious exception of other language classes). In reality, the practice is difficult to fully implement, as students and teachers interact with support staff who often do not speak English, offer Sanskrit prayers during festival assemblies, sing Bollywood hits in the playground or share jokes from home that just cannot be translated. On paper, in the school timetable, and through exams, each language is a clearly demarcated entity. On the playground, language boundaries are blurred as the students draw upon their wide linguistic repertoires, not through a lack of 'competency' in a particular language, but for a multitude of

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stylistic and domain-specific reasons that are so familiar to any bi- or multi-lingual speaker.

English to Non-English Spectrum

There are areas where the neat categorization of the languages is evident, notably through the education system. As numerous scholars have pointed out, the English-medium and vernacular-medium divide is one that polarizes the country, and reinforces class boundaries as access to English education is usually accompanied by a hefty price tag (see e.g. Ramanathan, 2005). While India gained independence 70 years ago, the hegemony of English instilled through colonialism still lives on in this era of neo-colonialism, and the demand for English (for social as much as economic reasons) is ever-growing, with many remarking on the mushrooming of private English-medium schools – of varying quality – over the last few decades. And yet, while the role that English plays in the social stratification of speakers in India is not to be dismissed, the English-vernacular dichotomy also depicts a misleading image of how languages are used in India. That is, it creates an image of separate, distinct languages, rather than representing the reality that speakers have a habit of letting their languages spill over their respective borders.

The 'fuzziness' of the division between languages raises important questions related to the theme of this special issue of SACS. Of course, in numerous situations, one language is used uniquely. But on many, many occasions, such as those previously mentioned, individuals weave their speech from various language strands simultaneously and often unconsciously. In a multilingual situation, where does English stop, and non-English begin? When does English stop being English? When does Hindi stop being Hindi? The phenomenon of *Hinglish*, a hybrid, non-codified mix of English and Hindi, and similar variations based on the mixing of English with other vernacular languages, is one that has come to the attention of many researchers over the last few decades (See e.g. Trivedi, 2011). However, it is important to be wary of falling once again in the trap of categorization, and visualizing Hinglish (or whichever hybrid language is in question) as a third category that sits neatly halfway between English and Hindi. Hinglish itself is an umbrella term that covers a myriad of bi- and multi-lingual strategies. It cannot be defined with simple statements such as 'English structures with Hindi words' or 'Hindi structures with English words', because it is a non-static, ever-changing entity that evades stable definitions. Hinglish can be used to describe how a speaker draws upon English and Hindi – in some cases, there may even be a third or fourth language present – to communicate with other speakers who are familiar with those languages. Thus, we can see that, even with the addition of the notion of Hinglish, our original question still stands: when does English become Hinglish? Is the use of a term that resists easy translation – *prasad, darshan, dharma* – within an otherwise 'English' sentence automatically Hinglish? At what point does Hinglish become *Indian English*?

Since the 1970s, scholars such as Braj B. Kachru (Kachru, 1985) have consistently argued for the establishment of 'Indian English' as a socio-culturally relevant and appropriated variety of English, alongside a score of other post-colonial varieties. Today, while the influence of Kachru's work is most definitely acknowledged, the debates have evolved to question the utility of nation-based articulations of language varieties (see e.g. Rubdy et al., 2008; Saraceni, 2015). Such debates call into question the possibility of delineating languages – by geographical

boundaries or otherwise – and the conceptualization of languages, or language varieties, as discrete entities. It is becoming increasingly important to acknowledge how languages, or language varieties, bleed into one another. In other words, to ask how the English/non-English debate may be, in certain contexts, less of a dichotomy, and more of a spectrum.

Language mixing: Some examples from Gujarat
In my first year teaching in Gujarat, one of the senior classes joined together to make a request to the teaching staff. Under a great deal of stress from their upcoming IGCSE exams and, as they explained, exhausted from speaking, writing, debating, analyzing in English for up to eight hours a day, six days a week, they requested that the English-only rules on campus be relaxed in the mornings. This, they argued, would give them crucial time before class to relax, chat and joke in Gujarati, the Mother Tongue of the majority of the students, or Hindi, the country's official language and the dominant language of popular culture. What this implied, then, was that they were not able – or not willing – to relax, chat and joke in English. Now, it should be noted here that these students were highly competent speakers of English; they would all go on to pass every IGCSE exam, with a great deal of them scoring A and A* grades across the board, including in the Humanities, First Language English and English Literature papers. Nevertheless, the teaching staff complied, and the students were granted permission to use non-English languages in the informal period before classes started in the morning. And yet, when observing the students during the allocated time, one could not help but notice that, despite their diplomatically crafted appeal to the teachers, they weren't speaking in Gujarati after all. That is, they were not speaking *only* in Gujarati. During this informal period each morning, their classrooms were filled with creative mixes of Gujarati, Hindi *and* English. It would have been utterly impossible to pinpoint where English stopped, and Hindi or Gujarati began.

It was not that the students were unable to say or express things in English that they could in Gujarati or Hindi, or vice versa. Granted, they were certainly more adept at writing essays in English due to their English-medium education, and possibly more suited to discussing home-related activities in Gujarati due to the predominant use of the language at home. But this was emphatically *not* a question of competency, or lack thereof. As already mentioned, these same students scored highly in their English exams, marked by examiners from the Cambridge IGCSE board. These same students communicated fluently with me in English when I arrived, before I had time to learn Hindi. These same students lived and communicated with Gujarati-speaking relatives and friends and deftly translated English for them. These same students enjoyed Hindi cinema, TV series and music. They were absolutely not lacking in ability in these languages. Rather, they switched between Hindi, Gujarati and English because, one could argue, their most comfortable linguistic mode of being was when they had the freedom to *pick and choose* from their full linguistic repertoire. To force them to speak one language – for whatever justifiable or non-justifiable reason – was not to put them in a position of incapacity, but rather to put an artificial strain on what is an entirely normal practice for multilingual speakers. Such practices are widely discussed in the domain of Linguistics. The term 'code-switching' denotes the seamless switching from one language or variety to another, but in doing so, "assumes that the two languages of bilinguals are two separate monolingual codes that could be used without reference to each other" (García, 2012: 1). Yet, more recent research has

moved towards the concept of *translanguaging,* which "posits that bilinguals have *one linguistic repertoire* from which they select features *strategically* to communicate effectively" (ibid). Understood in this way, then, the borders between languages are entirely blurred, and wholly unidentifiable.

'Scripted' Hinglish

The example above, taken from my students in a school in Gujarat, is not a practice unique to them, nor is it confined to the domain of conversation. The hybridization of languages is ubiquitous in India, from advertisements to films, television and music. And, importantly, it is not a new phenomenon, as demonstrates this extract from a *ghazal* written by Ayodhya Prasad Khatri in 1887, in which he expresses his anger against British rule:

> **Rent law** ka gham karen ya **Bill of Income Tax** ka?
> Kya karen apna nahiin hai **sense right now-a-days**.
> … **Darkness** chhaaya hua hai Hind mein chaaro taraf
> Naam ki bhi hai nahiin baaqi na **light now-a-days**.
> (cited by Trivedi, 2011, xii)

One is not short of contemporary examples, either. A brief glance at recent Bollywood movie titles illustrates how common this phenomenon is: *Jab We Met* (When we met), *Ek Tha Tiger* (There Once Was a Tiger), and *Dangerous Ishhq* (Dangerous Love – 'ishhq' being, in fact, an Urdu word of Persian origin, very commonly used in Hindi). Within the films, the dialogues themselves are clear examples of scripted Hinglish, although Hindi tends to be the more dominant language throughout. Advertisements also often draw upon Hinglish, as we can see in the Pepsi and Domino's adverts in Figures 1 and 2. In 2015, interested by this 'scripted' (that is, the planned and non-spontaneous) use of Hinglish, I recorded a short section of television adverts on two Hindi and two English channels – a prominent entertainment channel and a news channel from each – and observed the ratio of English to Hindi

Figures 1+2: Domino's and Pepsi advertisements in Hinglish (copyright Domino's and Pepsi)

advertisements as part of my Master's research. As would be expected, the results showed a larger percentage of Hindi advertisements than English ones on the Hindi channels, and vice versa (Table 1). However, for three of the four channels, the majority of the adverts used some kind of mixture, be it spoken Hindi combined with English writing, spoken Hinglish, Hindi written in Roman script, and so on.

	Percentage of adverts in only English	Percentage of adverts in only Hindi	Percentage of adverts mixing Hindi and English
Star Plus (Hindi Entertainment)	0	15	85
Aaj Tak (Hindi News)	43	0	57
Star World (English Entertainment)	34	0	66
Times Now (English News)	57	0	43

Table 1: Percentage of English and Hindi used in adverts on Hindi and English channels (from Highet, 2015. 'A "New English"? Indian English: Practices, Representations and Implications for Teaching (Master's dissertation, unpublished)

Of course, this was a very small-scale study that would require further research in order to draw empirical conclusions (see e.g. Kathpalia et al., 2015 for further elaboration of Hindi-English mixing in Indian billboards). There are, equally, many other interesting observations to comment upon, such as the near-total lack of Hindi-only adverts across the board, and the use of English in the name of the Hindi Entertainment channel, both of which are testament to the power, or symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1992) of English, which channels and advertisers capitalize on to attract viewers and sell certain kinds of products. It also raises the question of *which* languages are giving over more 'space' upon contact with others: here, at least, the dominance of English is evident. The findings are certainly interesting, if only in that they highlight directions for further research. But they definitely also provide evidence of the argument that languages as they are used in India do not stay in their own lanes. Perhaps, however, for reasons of historically established power dynamics that continue today, some are able to force others more easily off the road.

Conclusion: Where to draw the line?
The title of this paper is taken from a young student who I overheard talking with a teacher in 2016. After being scolded for not speaking English during the class, he retorted: "I am *tho* speaking English *only*!" With the lexical borrowing of '*tho*' from Hindi, and the calque of the discourse marker 'only' (from the Hindi '*hi*'), this sentence is an excellent example of how difficult the question of categorizing languages becomes. How do we define this sentence? Is it Hinglish? Or is it Indian English? Alternatively: do we *need* to categorize it?

What I have hopefully illustrated in this short commentary is the difficulty of drawing the line between languages in a multilingual situation such as India. Such divisions can arguably be seen in theory, but, in practice, boundaries crumble in the mouths of multilingual speakers. Understanding this also helps shed light on the heterogeneity of language usage across India: languages are not used or mixed in uniform ways across a single geographically defined place. In a country that has only been geographically delineated as such for seventy years, and in which almost 1.3 billion people speak *hundreds* of languages, it is hardly surprising that language use differs vastly. And yet, as Shakur and D'souza (2003) wrote in the editorial to the previous special issue of SACS, "it is evident that the potent idea of an homogenized identity of south Asia still prevails very much in the west, despite the phenomenal growth of regional art and cultural development in post-colonial nation states" (p.14). Despite the fact that referring to 'Indian English' (and, by extension, 'Hinglish' or 'Banglish' or 'Gujlish' or 'Punjablish', and so on) as a static, homogenous entity is as absurd as referring to 'European English' in the same way, the myth still persists. Languages as they are used in India do not conform to Western conceptualizations of language: one language, one nation is, by far, not the norm – and nor did it used to be in Western Europe, either. Multilingualism, language contact, translanguaging *are* the norm. Of course, some languages are embroiled in linguistic hegemonies, some find themselves more heavily associated with certain domains of life, and bi- or multi-lingual speakers are not necessarily equally competent in all areas in each of their languages. But, in multilingual communities, speakers weave their language threads in ways that cannot always be predicted or contained easily within one label.

So, where is the line between English and Non-English in India? I would argue that such a question is not only impossible to answer but also futile. In his 2010 book, *Language as a Local Practice*, Pennycook implores his reader to question the conceptualization of languages as distinct entities. As I hope my examples have shown, to pry languages apart in India is to lose an important aspect of multilingual communication. If I had known only English, I would have denied myself the opportunity to appreciate additional layers of communication with my Indian friends. I learnt Hindi not only to communicate with non-English speakers, but also to fully appreciate the code-switching or *translanguaging* that was so common among my friends and colleagues. Of course, these friends were fully capable of speaking uniquely in English, or translating the Hinglish parts for me. But, as a foreigner, to speak English with no understanding of vernacular languages was to miss out on an important part of meaning-making in a multilingual community. Thus, the line between English and non-English cannot so easily be drawn and, I would argue, *need not* be drawn. Rather than categorizing languages, what is needed is an interrogation of what we understand languages to be – and discussion of what this would mean for language education, not only in Gujarat, but also internationally.

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