USE OF THE ROMAN SCRIPT IN INDIA

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Abstract

This paper describes domains in India where the Roman script is used to write Indian languages. Although one function is to write languages for which there is no written script, the Roman script has other functions—as an icon and an index (Kurzon, 2003) and for wider communication. This paper explores these functions and describes some domains where the Roman script is used in India.

1. Introduction

Several countries in Asia use two or more scripts for official purposes. In Singapore, for example, public documents and road signs are written in the four official languages using three scripts—Mandarin is written in the Chinese script, Malay and English are in the Roman script, and Tamil is in the Tamil script. However, India is unusual in the sheer number of scripts that are used (Masica, 1996). Within a single country, 11 scripts are used for official documents and for education, with additional

scripts being used for intra-community communication. Although the scripts can be divided into three distinct categories based on Daniels' (1996) typology – Roman, Perso-Arabic, and Indic—Indians know that these scripts are mutually unintelligible, because each script uses a different set of symbols. This means that a person traveling from one Indian state to another may not be able to read official documents and road signs because the script is unfamiliar.

In order to enable written communication across different regions, a common script has sometimes been proposed (Kasturi and Kasturi, 2004). Devanagari, which is used to write the largest number of Indian languages (Hindi, Marathi, Sanskrit, Nepali, and Konkani) appears to be a likely candidate, but the states in South India rejected the attempt to impose Hindi in the 1960s (Krishna, 1991; Thirumalai, 2005).

This paper examines the use of one script—the Roman script—to write Indian languages. The obvious case is its use to write languages that do not have a script of their own, such as Garo, Khasi, Konkani, and Mizo. In addition, as an associate link language, the English language and script are used in several states in India for official purposes. The paper is organized as follows: first, the difference between languages and scripts is described; the next section describes the use of the Roman script as an icon and index (Kurzon, 2003); the final section describes various domains where the Roman script is used for wider communication in India.

2. Languages and Scripts

The terms 'language' and 'script' are often used interchangeably, but the link between languages and scripts is relatively weak. For example, in 1928 Turkey replaced the Arabic script, which was used to write Turkish, with the Roman script. Nearer home, Hindi and Urdu are often classified as one language that is written in two different scripts, namely, Devanagari and Perso-Arabic; this is an instance of digraphia (Grivelet, 2001). A single script may be used to write different languages; for example, the Perso-Arabic script is used to write languages as diverse as Urdu, Kashmiri, and Punjabi. And one language may be written in different scripts, as in the case of Konkani which is written in different scripts, such as Kannada, Devanagari, and the Roman script.

A script may also be used for transliteration. In one of his essays, Tharoor (2005) gives the example of an Independence Day speech by the Prime Minister, Deve Gowda. By convention, this speech is delivered in Hindi; however, since Deve Gowda did not know Hindi, the Hindi speech was written in his native Kannada script, so that he could read it out. In this instance, the language is Hindi but the script is Kannada. This is a case of transliteration and not translation, because the speaker did not understand the words he was reading.

3. Script as Icon

Kurzon (2003) draws a distinction between language as an icon and language as index. Often a sign (in the form of a language or a script) may function as an icon of nationalism or religion. However, the choice of language or script can act as an index, by pointing to the social phenomenon behind these languages.

In the example above, Hindi (as a language) is an icon of Indian nationalism. Other examples can be seen in signs for state and government organizations, such as road signs and the names of government institutions. Their iconic function is underscored by the fact that not many Indians can read these signs given the low literacy levels in India.

In several states, road signs are written in the language of the state and the Roman script. The road sign in Figure 1 shows the name of the area written in the Tamil script, followed by the Roman script.

Figure 1. Road sign in Chennai: Tamil followed by Roman script.

Such signs serve an important iconic function because they not only indicate what languages/scripts are recognized, but also their relative importance in the state based on the order of the scripts.

The second example of language and script as icon can be seen in signs for government institutions, such as banks, which are transliterations and not translations of the English name.   These carry the name of the organization in Devanagari, the Roman script, and the script of the state, which Mahadevan (2004) has termed "the three-script formula" (Figures 2 and 3). Again, the order of the scripts indicates a balance between national and state loyalties to languages.

Figure 2. Sign for airline in Bangalore in 3 scripts

Figure 3. Sign for bank in Mysore in 3 scripts

Delhi, which is divided into different administrative areas, has road signs in different formats. In the area under the administration of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), the format is similar to the one shown in Figure 1 for Chennai—the name of the area is written in the Devanagari script followed by the Roman script (Figure 4).

Figure 4.   Road sign in the MCD area of Delhi in 2 scripts.

However, in the area under the New Delhi Municipal Committee (NDMC), road signs are written in the four official languages of Delhi that use different scripts; at the top

is Devanagari followed by the Roman script, with Gurmukhi and Perso-Arabic side-by-side (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Road sign in the NDMC area of Delhi in 4 scripts

There has been an interesting change in road signs in the MCD area; in 2007, these road signs are being changed to include all four scripts, like the NDMC signs.

4. Script as Index

In contrast to its iconic use, languages and scripts may index social phenomenon, such as identity. A language like Serbo-Croat is written in the Cyrillic script by Serbians, who are Orthodox, whereas Croatians, who are Catholic, use the Roman script (Magner, 2001). The Arabic script is an icon of Islam, and so the Perso-Arabic script is used by Muslims to write different languages, such as Sindhi, Kashmiri, and Malayalam. A similar move is seen in the case of Punjabi, which used to be written in the Perso-Arabic script, but Sikhs use the Gurmukhi script to assert their Sikh identity (Gill, 1996).

When the Roman script is proposed for an Indian language, the choice is not neutral but indexes identity. In Goa, Christians use the Roman script for Konkani (Kurzon, 2003). In Assam, the selection of a script for the Bodo language is complex; the rejection of the Assamese script is a negative index of identity, while the debate over Devanagari versus the Roman script involves pedagogical advantages (Sharma, 2001) and affiliation to the country.

Kurzon (2003) points out that many signboards may use a language or script merely as a convention. Shop signs that are in both Devanagari and the Roman script do not necessarily mean that the shopkeeper speaks Hindi and English. However, this is not always the case. Figure 6 shows a signboard that indexes the owner's linguistic abilities and loyalties; the owner is a Sikh who is fluent in the four languages shown on the sign—English, Punjabi, Tamil, and Hindi.

Figure 6. Scripts as index: Sign in four scripts

5. Scripts for Communication

Embedded in the indexical function of language are two other more practical considerations— the need for wider communication and the difficulties of typing in the Indian languages.

The use of the Roman script to write Indian languages can be partly attributed to the educational system. Since English is one of the languages taught in school under the three-language formula, children who reach middle school have learned the English alphabet. At the same time, many students may not read Devanagari fluently because it is their third language/script. For example, a Bengali professional explained that English was his dominant academic language in school, Bangla his second language, and Hindi a third language; hence, he can read Hindi faster when it is written in the Roman script than in the Devanagari script. A similar situation holds true for many Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) who study in English; they may know spoken Hindi but may not be comfortable reading it in the Devanagari script.

The 1990s saw enormous growth in the use of the Internet and SMS messaging on mobile phones in India. Currently, there are 40 million Internet users (Internet World

Statistics, 2007) and over 156 million mobile phone users (TRAI, 2007) in India. However, the technology for typing and viewing Indic scripts on these devices has not kept pace with these changes due to lack of standards or multiple standards for the fonts by different providers (Keniston, 2001).   Indians circumvented the problem by typing messages in their own languages in the only script available on computers and mobile phones—the Roman script. For example, the mobile phone provider, Airtel, sends its customers SMS messages, such as *Abhi Call* ('Call now').

Although there are conventions for transliteration, such as the IAST scheme and ITRANS, these involve the use of lower and upper case letters as well as dots, and so most people use a casual version that does not indicate the retroflex sounds but is easier to type. These transliteration rules are not rigid; for example, although the /hə/ sound is identical in both words below, the convention followed for transliteration differs:

हर is transliterated as *har*   हम is transliterated as *hum*

These two factors — knowledge of the Roman script as well as the inadequate technology for Indic scripts—have combined to create a situation in which Indians use the Roman script to read and write messages. The section below identifies different domains where the Roman script is used to transliterate words in Hindi.

Armed forces

Several books, articles, and speeches mention the fact that in the Indian Armed Forces, where Hindustani is used, the language is written in the Roman script; this practice was initiated by the British to enable communication between the officers and the soldiers (Chadha, 2003; Krishna, 1991; Language in India, 2004; Rangila, Thirumalai, and Mallikarjun, 2001; Sahni, 1972).

Movie posters

In Hindi movie posters, the name of the movie is written in the Roman script and/or the Devanagari script (occasionally, Perso-Arabic is also used). Figure 7 shows a sample DVD cover for a Hindi movie. Here, the motivation is access to an even

wider audience—viewers in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, where Hindi movies are popular but viewers do not know the Devanagari script.
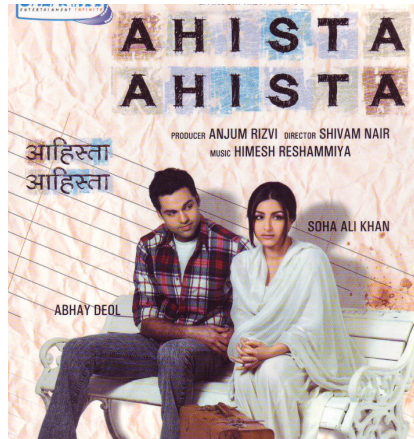

Figure 7. Hindi DVD cover in 2 scripts: Roman and Devanagari

Advertisements

Recent advertisements for lifestyle products use Hindi written in the Roman script. Although the motivation for this strategy is partly an advertising gimmick, it is also a way to reach a consumer base that knows spoken Hindi but not Devanagari.

Figure 8. Hindi advertising slogan written in the Roman script

More unusual is the advertisement found in Chennai, shown in Figure 9. The slogan is in Hindi written in the Roman script, but the target audience is not clear since the state language is Tamil.

Figure 9. Hindi in the Roman script in Chennai

Magazines and newspapers

Popular magazines, particularly film magazines, and the entertainment section of newspapers frequently use code-mixing. The matrix language of the sentences is English, but Hindi words and phrases are interspersed. As Viswamohan (2004) points out, the use of Hindi words has an "inclusive" function, because it makes readers feel more at ease.

> Kyunki Ekta needs a rethink (Because Ekta needs a rethink)
>
> > (*Cine Blitz*, October 2005, p. 137)

> [Her] expression freezes but just for a nano second. "Nahi yaar, I have just made a house there, it is my chutti house."
>
> > (Jaya Drona, Times News Network)

Newspaper editorials may also carry Hindi phrases written in the Roman script.

> The Congress-led UPA government's main plank has been the aam aadmi.
>
> > (Times of India Editorial, 2007)

When interviews are reported verbatim, the English translation is given in parentheses.

> Sharma says she was given the option of "ya to sat jaa, ya hat jaa (cosy up or leave)".
>
> > (Abantika Ghosh, Times News Network)

In all these cases, the Hindi words have been written in the Roman script; further, these words are not italicized, a convention used to mark foreign words. In these cases, the motivation is both to reach the non-Devanagari knowing reader as well as to get past the difficulties of using two different sets of typefaces in a single sentence.

More unusual is the text for an in-flight magazine, *KrisWorld*, produced by Singapore Airlines. The synopses of the in-flight movies are in English followed by the language of the movie—Korean, Cantonese, Japanese, Arabic, or Tamil— written in its respective script. The only language written in the Roman script is Hindi (Figure 11)..
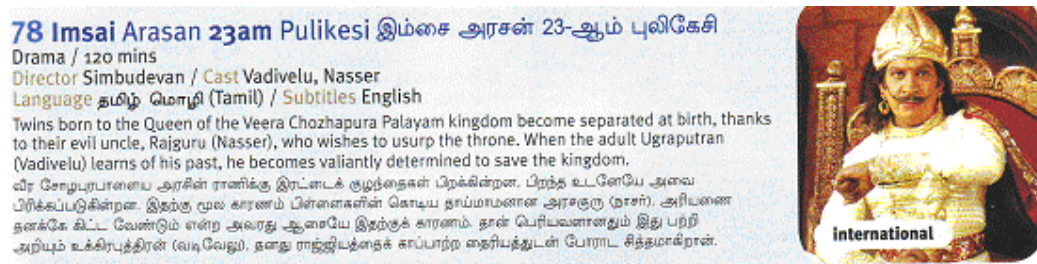

Figure 10. Film synopsis: Tamil in the Tamil script
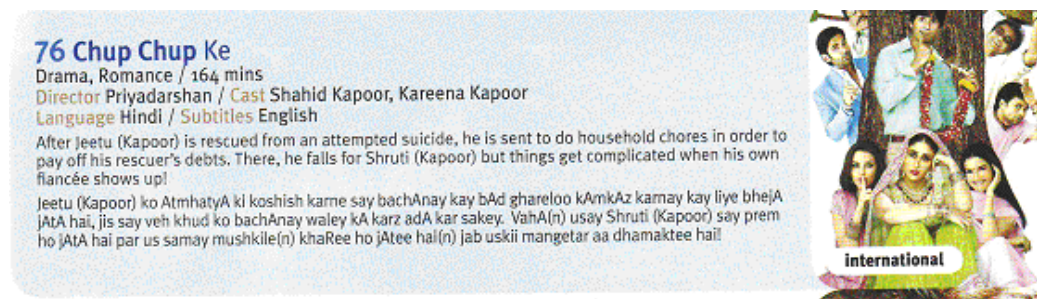

Figure 11. Film synopsis: Hindi in the Roman script

Here, technology is clearly not an issue since other languages have been written in their associated scripts; instead, we see an attempt to communicate with people who do not read Hindi in the Devanagari script (such as Non-Resident Indians).

Textbooks
In the domain of English textbooks, the norm has been 'English Only', but recent textbooks, such as those published by the State Council for Educational Research and

Training (SCERT), have taken a more practical approach by using an Indian (and local context) in which Hindi words are used along with English. In the Class II textbook, the following instructions are provided for the teacher:

> Is there a poem in your language about elephant? Here's one in Hindi:
> *Dhammak dhammak aataa haathii*
> *Dhammak dhammak jaataaa haaathi*
> *Kitne kele khaataaa haathii*
> *Ye to nahin bataataa haathi*
>
> (*English 2,* Unit 15, page 51)

The Hindi poem is not written in Devanagari but in the Roman script for a very practical reason—English teachers may come from different language backgrounds and may not know how to read the Devanagari script. Since they are familiar with the Roman script through their knowledge of English, they can sound out the words even if they do not understand their meaning (Rimli Bhattacharya, personal communication). In this case, the Roman script is used to communicate with people from different language backgrounds.

Conclusion

In India, the Roman script is used for multiple purposes. It can serve as an icon by the state or central government to indicate that English is an associate link language. It can also index identity and language loyalty in communities and individuals. Beyond these functions, the Roman script is used in several different domains for wider communication among Indians who may not know the script associated with a language.

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