Hindi in Banaras in the 1970s

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Abstract

This paper looks at learning Hindi in Banaras in the late 1970s and the tension between learning Hindi as the language of national integration and Hindi as a means for local communication.[1] This paper is a development of the themes I addressed in papers I gave at the Canberra AASA conference[2] on the earliest Hindustani teaching materials, and a paper in the AASA journal from this year[3] on Hindustani teaching during the Raj. Here I turn my focus to the 1970s and I suggest that the linguistic situation I encountered in Banaras can be understood in terms of there being three registers of Hindi in use at that time, popular Hindi, literary Hindi, and traditional Hindi. I then describe how I learned Hindi and who I learned it from in order to show that most people in the city in addition to speaking other languages than Hindi also spoke in one or more of these registers of Hindi.[4]

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[1] This paper was presented to the 16th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Wollongong 26 June - 29 June 2006. It does not appear on the Conference Proceedings website as it was rejected for inclusion as it was judged to be too personal in nature. The paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.

[2] Friedlander, P. (2004), 'Travel talk: phrases for travellers in India', in *Asia Examined: Proceedings of the 15th Biennial Conference of the ASAA*, 2004, Canberra, Australia. Canberra: Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) & Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (RSPAS), The Australian National University. ISBN 0-9580837-1-1. [online at: http://coombs.anu.edu.au/ASAA/conference/proceedings/Friedlander-P-ASAA2004.pdf].

[3] Friedlander, P. (2006), 'Hindustani Textbooks from the Raj', in *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, National University of Singapore, Singapore, Volume 3 Supplement, April 2006, ISSN 0219-9874. [online at: http://e-flt.nus.edu.sg]

[4] Note that due to technical limitations imposed by using Times Roman font diacritic marks have been omitted from the transliteration of Hindi in this paper.

Introduction

India is a multi-lingual country. In addition to Hindi and English and eighteen or so other major languages recognised in the constitution there are a very large number of languages spoken by smaller numbers of people.[5] However, I am not going to go into detail about numbers or statistics in this paper at all, but rather talk about some aspects of what I observed while learning Hindi and how it points to the difficulty in how we define a language to begin with.

Most people I met in Banaras were multi-lingual. Some spoke some form of local dialect of Hindi, mostly Bhojpuri, but in some cases also local dialects from other places, such as Avadhi. They often also spoke another Indian language, such as Bengali or Marathi. On top of this they could all speak in various registers of Hindi. Moreover, some people could speak in more registers than others, and it seemed that the more educated you were the more registers you could speak in.

Andrew Dalby has argued that the term 'language' can be understood as meaning both 'a group of mutually intelligible dialects' and a 'standard form of speech and writing adopted by several dialects'.[6] What I want to explore in this paper is the way that registers in language, relate to language and dialects. By the term register I mean a form of a language which whilst sharing in the common grammar of that language or dialect uses a distinctive vocabulary and phraseology which gives it a separate identity. In particular I want to distinguish the registers of popular Hindi, literary Hindi and traditional Hindi which I encountered in Banaras.

Learning Popular Hindi

My understanding of Hindi is shaped by how I learned Hindi. In 1977 my interest in art and travel coincided and took me on my first visit to India during which I became fascinated by India. What I found was when I was drawing pictures in the streets, which was what I was 'doing' in India, people wanted to talk to me about what I was doing.[7] It was frustrating for me that most of them could not speak English and so I became convinced that I would never understand India by only speaking to people in English. So I decided to learn an Indian language, and I chose Hindi, on the basis of it being spoken over a wide area.

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[5] There is a good brief summary of this complex situation in the Wikipedia's 'List of national Languages of India' at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_national_languages_of_India, accessed: Saturday, 3 February 2007.

[6] Dalby, A. (2002), *Language in Danger*, London: Penguin Books, p. 26.

[7] Some of my drawings and paintings from this period can be seen by following a relevant link to artworks from the home page of *Bodhgaya News* at: http://www.bodhgayanews.net.

The first book I bought to try and learn Hindi from was called something like *Hugo's Latest Hindi Tutor*, as far as I can remember, but it was actually a Hindustani textbook from around 1947 I realised as I studied it. I still recall trying to get the ear-cleaning men on Connaught place to work through it with me and finally giving up when we got to the sentence 'Take these socks to the market and have them darned', which none of them thought made any sense in Hindi.

Then in September 1978 I bought a book, *Teach Yourself Hindi* by Mohini Rao[8] and sat down with people in places like Agra and Khajuraho and tried to get them to go through the book with me. But I found that it was often hard for people to understand the books I was using, and harder still to learn from them. But I kept trying.

Then in December I was in Banaras and sitting in a tea shop talking to a man, Krishna Mohan Gupta, about trying to learn Hindi and he said he could teach me. What he wanted in exchange was for me to also teach English in his coaching institute. So I ended up teaching English each evening for two hours in the Maharishi Vipragupta Institute of Spoken English and then learning Hindi for two hours.

The way Krishna taught me Hindi was unusual. The context is we would sit along with Mani Rao, the principal of the school, an old gentleman who had been a lawyer and came to share tea each evening, and the tea boy. Then each evening Krishna would introduce some form and we would drill in various forms of it for the session, interspersed by chatting about all matters relevant to running the school and their lives. In a way it was very traditional, a kind of guru disciple relationship of one to one teaching. It was entirely oral, I did not write anything down for the first year, and in a sense that also made it traditional. However, the basic idea of how to teach according to teaching construction patterns was totally non-traditional and based on the then current approach to teaching English. Krishna was actually a lecturer in teaching pedagogy at the Harish Chandra Teacher Training College in Varanasi.

It was in a sense also akin to the technique I was asked to use in the English classes, which was a version of teaching techniques based on the idea of immersion teaching. Only in that case I had no idea really what I was doing at all and I based each day's class around the previous night's BBC English by Radio broadcast. But, somehow I scraped through.

The other critical element in my learning though was not the classes but what I did during the day. I practiced. I lived in a succession of rented rooms, all with people who basically spoke little, or no, Hindi. So I had to speak to my hosts in Hindi. In addition my fascination with drawing the life around me on the streets did not lead to an extensive social life with Westerners, but rather to continual interaction with people on the street. So now

[8] Rao, M. (1978), *Teach Yourself Hindi*, Delhi: Hindi Pocket Books.

instead of the kids just pestering me, I would pester them and practice the construction of the day with them. In this way I began to develop a relationship with various people in the Bengali Tola area where I was staying.

I started by taking a room above a shop on the corner of the road down to Harishcandra Ghat. My hosts were Bengalis who spoke Hindi and Bhojpuri and English. However, I did not stay long there for two reasons. First, during *Durga puja* it turned out that each of the three roads at the cross roads had their own loud speaker systems playing different songs 24 hours a day. It was a sudden introduction to noise pollution. Second, and more seriously, my hosts cheated me. I had a friend in the UK who wanted me to buy some flutes for him and send them back, which I did through my hosts thinking that they were giving me a fair price. Then a few weeks later I saw the flute seller down town hawking his wears and shouting out '*bansuri tin rupaya*' ('Three rupee flute'), but then seeing a Westerner he said in English 'Thirty rupee flute!' I then went up to him and commented on the difference and then he told me that there had been a similar difference in the deal I had done with my hosts. This brought home vividly to me the way in which learning Hindi was also of immense practical advantage for being in India. I moved out as soon as possible.

I moved into a room with a Mallah, or boatman, family by the river at Narad Ghat. This was better because it was quiet, idyllic in fact, and my landlady spoke no English. She spoke a form of Avadhi as she was originally from near Lucknow, Bhojpuri as that was her husband's language, and rather 'broken' Hindi. For instance she always spoke about Lucknow as 'nucklow' which is a typical dialect form of the word and used masculine plural verb forms when talking about what she was doing, which is also a feature of vernacular Hindi usage. My landlady was known only as *Sitaram ki mai* which means 'Mother of Sitaram'. This was a typical way that women were spoken of in Hindi by referring to them as the mother of somebody rather than by their name. One explanation of this I was given was that this meant that it made it more difficult for black magic to be done against somebody as their personal name could not be overheard.

From the time I stayed with this family I was able to observe that within the Hindi speaking community of Banaras there were people who did not speak standard Hindi at all, but rather a kind of broken Hindi which was a mix of dialect forms, Bhojpuri and Avadhi in this case, and standard Hindi.

However, one problem with the room I had rented though turned out to be that during the rainy season it would get submerged by the river. So I had to move again after a while and then I moved in with a family in an alley near Chauki ghat. This family had three sisters living together, none with their husbands, and their various sons. They were from Banaras and spoke a mix of Hindi, Bhojpuri and Bengali. Everybody in this family could speak standard Hindi as well as dialect Hindi forms and would switch from Hindi to Bengali at the drop of a

hat. Indeed, at one point I remember noting that even in a single sentence they would mix up Hindi, Bengali and Bhojpuri words and phrases. I guess that anybody who has watched contemporary Indian TV channels like Zee TV will have heard similar language switching going on, but mostly between Hindi and English.

I think the good thing about learning Hindi by observing how Hindi was used in different families was that it meant I got a good grasp of the way the structures and flow of the language worked. I was exposed through the constant practice I had while drawing to a wide range of Hindi registers. It also seemed to me from this experience that the idea that there was any single standard form of Hindi was also obviously not true. I was continuously exposed to switching of registers of Hindi, switching of dialects, and switching between broken Hindi and standard Hindi. There was also switching from language to language, such as Hindi to Bengali, Hindi to English, and even Hindi to Marathi in another family I stayed with.

It is I suggest similar to the kind of situation which 18th century learners of Hindi encountered in Bengal in which it was difficult to work out whether what was being spoken was a single language, or a variety of languages.[9]

There were of course in fact a variety of languages, registers of languages and dialects, being spoken in everyday life in Banaras around me at the time. I realised that figuring out what was the 'Hindi' element in it was not as obvious as might seem at first sight.

In general I came to think that the term 'Hindi' related closely to a kind of popular Hindi of the time which was a mixture of local elements and national elements, typical of the language used in Hindi films and popular Hindi fiction.

I want to discuss in particular one example of this, which is the magazine 'Detective world' (*jasusi duniya*). I still have a copy of this magazine; issue 343 for March 1982 which contained a novel called 'The Stone Girl' (*pathar ki larki*).[10] It was a monthly magazine published from Allahabad which was a translation of detective stories by the famous Urdu author Ibn Safi (1928-1980).[11] Ibn Safi wrote over 120 novels in the 'Detective world' series, published in Hindi as a monthly magazine, in which each month was normally a separate novel. Detective fiction has a long history in Northern India in Hindi and Urdu[12] and this magazine was part of that tradition. It also had many similarities to some of the popular films

[9] See also the discussion of this issue in my paper for the Canberra AASA conference.
[10] Safi, Ibn (1982), *Jasusi duniya: Pathar ki larki*, Ilahabad: Nakahat Pablikesans.
[11] For a brief biography of Ibn Safi see: 'Ibn-e-Safi' in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibn-e-Safi; accessed Saturday, 3 February 2007.
[12] For an account of this literature see: Orsini, F. (2004), 'Detective Novels: A commercial genre in Nineteenth-century North India,' in *India's Literary History*, Blackburn S. and Dalmia V. (eds.). Delhi: Permanent Black, pp. 435-482.

of the time, such as the 1978 Hindi supernatural horror film *Jaani Dushman* in terms of how it often mixed elements of the supernatural with the detective fiction genre.

Linguistically it was in the mix of Urdu and Hindi which has been typical of popular Hindi. In that it was by a Muslim author and originally written in Urdu, but then translated into Hindi, it was also typical of the non-sectarian nature of popular Hindi culture. The Hindi versions were translated into Hindi from Urdu by somebody called Prem Prakash. I did not realise at the time that the translation process was actually a kind of transcreation process as well. The translator had changed the name, religion and culture, of one of the leading characters. In the Urdu version the leading characters are called Colonel Faridi and his assistant Captain Hameed. In the Hindi version they have become Colonel Vinod and Captain Hameed. So the novels had become more syncretic of Islamic and Hindu traditions in their Hindi versions than they were perhaps in their Urdu originals.

This points to a vital feature of the popular Hindi register which I was learning. It was a liberal mix of Hindi and Urdu and freely used vocabulary from both literary traditions.

Learning Literary Hindi

Alongside learning the popular register of Hindi, I also began to encounter the literary forms of Hindi. I will distinguish here literary Hindi from traditional Hindi but in reality the range of Hindi registers in use often included both formats which I will discuss later.

Literary Hindi was, and is, heavily influenced by the notion that to create vocabulary all you need to do is to coin a new word for something based on a Sanskrit word. I remember my teacher Krishna Mohan saying to me that the great thing about Hindi was in fact that you could always invent new words in it in this way.

He gave me a book he had written in this style of Hindi as well, 'The path to Happiness' (*Ananda-path*)[13] which I would also like to explore a bit here. However, I should point out that at the time it meant nothing to me as I found its contents quite impenetrable. Indeed, even now I am not sure really what it is about.

In a sense this is typical of quite a lot of literary Hindi. It addresses a very small audience, essentially those who know something of Sanskrit as well as Hindi, and it addresses the concerns, often, of a small intellectual Hindi speaking elite. Its origins are to be found in the works of Hindi reformers from Banaras itself, such as Bharatendu Harishcandra in the second half of the 19th century.[14]

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[13] Gupta, K. M. (1978), *Anand-path*, Varanasi: Atmadip prakasan.

[14] For a recent discussion of Hariscandra's role see McGregor, S. (2004). 'The Progress of Hindi: Part 1', in Pollock S. (ed.). *Literary Cultures in History*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, pp. 949-954.

Whilst the popular and literary registers of Hindi normally shared the same grammar they were clearly distinguished by the frequency of use of words from Sanskrit. The history of the development of Hindi as a language is outside the scope of this essay. However, in terms of its vocabulary it is possible to distinguish three elements. First, there are *tadbhav* words, words which have origins in Sanskrit but have been transformed over time by processes of phonetic change into new forms. For instance the Sanskrit *ksetra* for field became *khet* in Hindi. Second, you also get what are called *tatsam* forms of words, Sanskrit words used unchanged in Hindi. Third, you get loan words from other languages such as Persian, Arabic, Portuguese and English.

As an example of the kind of ratios of vocabulary items, I will compare the first hundred words of Ibn Safi's *Pathar Ki Larki* and Krishna Mohan's *Anand Path*. In *Pathar Ki Larki* there are about half a dozen *tatsam* Sanskrit words, about half a dozen words clearly borrowed from Persian-Arabic and two English loan words and the remainder, the vast majority, are *tadbhav* forms. In *Anand Path* around three quarters of the words are *tatsam* Sanskrit words and there are no Persian-Arabic or English loanwords at all. Take even the first sentence of each and you can see the difference, there are no *tatsam* forms in *Pathar Ki Larki*, and almost all the words in *Anand Path* are *tatsam* forms.

Pathar Ki Larki – us dev ko dekhkar unki ghigghi bandh gai.

'When he saw the spirit he choked.'

Anand Path – Manusya srsti ka sarvottam prani hai.

'Man is the highest being in creation.'

This kind of contrast made me very aware of the way that even whilst popular Hindi and literary Hindi shared a common grammar, there were extreme variations in the sources they drew their vocabulary from. Indeed, whilst they cannot be called different languages or dialects they represent strikingly different registers in Hindi language.

Learning Traditional Hindi

Early on during my stay in Banaras, on the *ghat* one day, I met Ramesh Bajpai who was an English teacher at a local school, the Ango-Bengali Chintamani High School, and we became friends. He was a keen poet and introduced me to the world of Hindi poetry.

A couple of factors which are relevant to the popularity of poetry at this time are worth mentioning. First TV had not yet appeared, it came to Banaras in around 1984, and so people had much more spare time than they do now. Second, radio, although it existed in the form of AIR (All India Radio) was not very exciting. However, one thing it did broadcast was poetry. Third, the newspapers were interested in publishing poetry amongst the articles in them. Finally it was easy to also self publish collections of poetry. Add all that together and

mix in a lively traditional culture of the performance of poetry and you had the recipe for enthusiastic poets.

Another friend, a Hindi teacher, once said to me that his response to finding out somebody was keen on Hindi poetry was to run away as fast as possible. Mine was somewhat different. I was fascinated, but puzzled. The poems at poetry readings (*kavi goshti*) covered an extraordinary range of genres. They would include traditional religious verses from authors like Tulsidas. There was also a lot of romantic (*chayavadi*) lyric poetry like that of the 19th century English romantics. Finally there was always lots of 'new poetry' (*nai kavita*) which often seemed a mix of existential self doubt and despair, social criticism and political polemics.

Common to almost all of it though was that it was largely incomprehensible to me, but elicited the most rapturous applause from the often quite large audiences. Its vocabulary used a lot of *tatsam* Sanskrit at some times, and at other times words from medieval Hindi dialects. Also the range of subjects dealt with did not fit into any one genre of literature.

For instance take the example of the 'The Varanasi Student Movement' (*Varanasi chatra andolan*) by Ghanshyam Gupta.[15] This is a kind of narrative poem in a traditional format about a student protest movement in 1971 which was put down by the authorities with great savagery. It's certainly not a religious poem, yet in language and format it's like a religious poem. It begins:

uta hath me sulekhni ko, punah nil masi bharta hun.
suno! pathvid vyatha-katha ka, subharambh ab karta hun.
pandra kos dur kasi se, pascim disi shahi path par.
aurai bazaar ek laghu prakrti avaran me sundar.
'Having picked up the quill with my hand, and charging it with azure hue.
Hark! O wise reader to this tragic tale of woe, as I make its auspicious beginning.
Fifteen leagues from Kashi, in the East on the State Highway.
There lies the tiny market of Aurai, beautiful amidst its natural setting.'

The grammar here is still modern Hindi, but the metre and usage mark it as a creation in the mode of a medieval poem. Unlike literary Hindi the proportion of *tatsam* words is also quite low and there are quite a few Persian-Arabic loanwords, such as *Shahi*; but the majority of the vocabulary is drawn from the *tadbhav* Hindi vocabulary.

Ghanshyam was one of the sons of the owners of *Madhur Jalpan,* a traditional sweet shop in the centre of the town, and he and his brothers all lived a traditional Banarasi lifestyle.

[15] Gupta, G. (nd.), *Varanasi chatra andolan*, Varanasi: Vidya mudran sthali.

The family owned a boat and the brothers would take turns and spend each day from about 4-8 pm. (*sham*) going across the river to exercise and for recreation. In the later evenings he and other friends would often gather for informal poetry recitations. Some of these were held at the home of Gajanan, an elderly retired man who lived near Dashashvamedh Ghat who knew the 16th century epic religious poem *Ramcaritmanas* by heart. He would sing bits of it or other poems by its author, Tulsidas, or materials he had made up in a similar vein at the gatherings. Meanwhile, Ramesh and his friends would recite abstract lyrical verses in modern Hindi. Other venues for poetry readings included school halls and semi-public lending libraries.

Registers, Cultures, Communities and Individuals

Each of the registers of Hindi I encountered involved not only linguistic issues but was also tied up with religious and cultural issues.

The popular Hindi register in detective fiction and the Bollywood cinema was linked to a sphere of public culture in which Hindus and Muslims were participants in a modernising secular culture at a national level.

The literary Hindi register also dealt with these same issues, but was limited in its focus to the Hindi heartland it seemed, the area in which literary Hindi was read. Also its extensive use of Sanskrit *tatsam* vocabulary clearly limited its appeal to those who knew some Sanskrit or well educated elite communities. Whilst there were no doubt educated Muslims who could read this register of Hindi it appealed I felt mostly to Hindus.

The traditional Hindi register was also overwhelmingly patronized by the Hindu community, yet it was only partially aligned with the notion of a national literary Hindi. In its continuing use of local dialect forms, and traditional forms, it also spoke largely to an audience which was limited to readers, and hearers, from a much smaller area, essentially just the state of Uttar Pradesh.

However, if you approach the issue of registers from the angle of which people spoke which registers in Banaras at the time another picture emerges as well. Pretty much everybody I met could speak local dialect forms of Hindi, and did at home as a kind of household language. Everybody could also speak some form of popular Hindi, although in the case of some of my contacts, such as the mother in the Mallah family, they could only speak in a kind of register which people sometimes call broken Hindi, i.e. with very loose grammar.

In addition educated people, both Hindu and Muslim, could also speak and understand the traditional Hindi register and the literary Hindi register. This meant that what I observed was that for some people, like Krishna Mohan, my teacher, Hindi meant at one and the same time each and every dialect and register of Hindi and Hindi as a standardized literary language.

So Dalby's two definitions of language, as mutually intelligible dialects, and a standardized national language were both applicable to his understanding of what constituted Hindi. But, for less educated people I knew the literary register of Hindi was often not fully comprehensible as its Sanskrit vocabulary was to some degree opaque to them. For them Hindi meant, their own dialect and the popular Hindi of the cinema and detective fiction.

Conclusion

Whether it was TV itself, or TV was a harbinger of change on a greater scale I cannot say, but the coming of TV in 1984 saw the death of this culture and by the 1990s the traditional culture was only a shadow of what it had been. People no longer gathered to recite poetry like they used to, instead they watched TV. Gajanan's home was demolished for a road, the libraries closed, and work practices changed making the time people had spent on poetry harder to find. The current state of traditional Hindi culture in Banaras seems today only a shadow of its former self.

Literary Hindi continues to exist, but its audience was always limited and it has never been popular, or sought to be popular being essentially an elite literature.

Only popular Hindi really still flourishes, but even there changes are apparent. The Hindi/Urdu detective novel is gone, and has now developed into a distinctly 'Hindi' format published from Delhi and elsewhere. The cinema is still a stronghold of Hindi of course and the newspapers and broadcast media are more influential than ever before.

I suggested at the beginning of the paper that one way of looking at this is to question whether there was a tension between Hindi as a language of national integration and Hindi as a means for local communication. During the period when I was learning Hindi it seemed to me that apart from popular Hindi the other registers I encountered were much more to do with local communication, sharing ideas amongst particular groups of people, rather than national integration. At the time it was literary Hindi which was officially espoused as being the future national language of integration, but was obviously failing to attain that goal. Now, in the early 21st century its possible to see that what is happening is that dialect, traditional and literary Hindi registers are all fading away under the onslaught of a modernity which only the popular Hindi register has successfully developed a language to deal with.

But, I have to say in conclusion that I am glad that I had a chance to learn Hindi in Banaras in the late nineteen-seventies as I was able to do so in an era when there was an extraordinary richness and depth to the Hindi speaking cultures I encountered. I started out thinking I would never understand India by only speaking to people in English and in the end by learning Hindi I realised that there were as many understandings of what constituted India as their were communities and cultures that I encountered.

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