

SAI Module on “Sites of Translation”
Final Report (Lahiri)

English Edge: Language and Globalization in Delhi

Crossing linguistic milieus is unavoidable in Delhi. A day of errands in this polyglot city might easily start in the Punjabi-dominated commercial chaos of Karol Bagh, move on to a Khan Market bookstore in which the default language of address is English, and end in the publishers’ district of Daryaganj, where the genteel and relaxed Hindi spoken indoors throws the rapid-fire dialect of the street into relief. There is a long-established local economy of languages at work here—with English and formal Hindi being accorded greater prestige and value than Punjabi and the Hindi-based language of the street—as well as an ecology of niches and spheres that hinges on each language’s distinctive social roles. But with the recent emergence of the youthful, English-speaking call center worker as an icon in a city that is increasingly concerned with producing value in the global economy, Delhi’s characteristic patterns of multilingualism appear to be in flux. Yet how does one explore shifting articulations amongst language, urban space, social class, educational systems, and labor markets *anthropologically*, that is, from the ground up? In my preliminary exploration of this complex subject for the “Sites of Translation” module, I took as my point of entry the personal aspirations and motives of some Delhi-ites or *Dilliwale* who are concerned with improving their command over English.

An intermediate English conversation class for adults is in full swing at County, an independent language school in South Delhi (photo 1). As a guest in the class, I take the opportunity to ask the their reasons for being there. Their responses firmly yoke English to vistas of social prestige and mobility. Mr. S., owner of a hosiery business says that he covets the respect he sees lavished upon those who speak English fluently and confidently. Another student, Mr. K., admits ruefully that he feels ashamed when telemarketers hang up on him, apparently having decided that his poor English makes it unlikely that he’ll qualify for the credit cards they’re selling. As both men speak, I am intrigued by the fluency with which they borrow words and switch between Hindi and English. Why is it even necessary to learn pure English, I ask, now that “Hinglish” has become visible and accepted in the speech of public celebrities and movie characters? (“Hinglish” is a media-coined shorthand for a hybrid style of speech that alternates between the two languages.) The students set me straight, revealing themselves as active observers and analysts of the forms of value and distinction generated by a multilingual social field. “Hinglish,” they explain, is only trendy if you can command both languages and can *choose* how to mix them; if you’re just borrowing words to fill the gaps in what you know, it’s not.

Schools like County can be found in every corner of Delhi, offering a rich site for exploring the peculiarly middle class strategy of investing in linguistic capital in order to access elite echelons (photo 2). My research also identified other sites where social transformation assumes more or less explicit linguistic dimensions: corporate and personal “grooming” institutes that impart social finesse; publications offering readers the linguistic resources needed dealings with bureaucracy (photo 3); lobbies for and against

English medium tracks in state-funded schools; even cyberliteracy programs that integrate computers into the informal learning environments of children living in slums. Based on my initial investigations, I am currently developing a longer-term research project that will address three sets of questions. The concerns *linguistic practices* involving language borrowing and mixing. How do variously-positioned groups cultivate and employ the language skills they consider necessary to get ahead in the post-liberalization era? What forms of multilingualism are being promoted within Delhi's education, marketing, and media milieus by professional experts with an eye on national as well as global labor markets? My second set of questions touches on *language ideology*. How are English and Hindi respectively valued within official policies as well as public culture today? Is globalization furthering the legitimacy of English as an Indian language and helping to overwrite its colonial associations? Finally, my project will address questions of *language politics*. Are the aspired-for middle class identities associated with English overshadowing or reinforcing other divisions of caste and religion? Is English indeed becoming a hybridized urban *lingua franca* in wide use or is it continue to serve as a means of reproducing existing forms of privilege? During the upcoming academic year, I will be conducting six months of fieldwork on these questions in Delhi with support from the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs.