



# The Impact of English as a Global Language on Indian Regional Languages: Language Policy, Cultural Identity, and Linguistic Diversity in Contemporary India

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## Abstract

This paper examines the complex relationship between English as a global lingua franca and the preservation of India's rich linguistic heritage, analysing how the dominance of English in education, administration, and economic sectors affects the vitality and intergenerational transmission of regional languages. Through an analysis of language policies, sociolinguistic data, and theoretical frameworks from linguistic imperialism studies, this research demonstrates that while English provides opportunities for global integration and socioeconomic mobility, its hegemonic position creates significant challenges for linguistic diversity. The study reveals that UNESCO identifies 196 endangered languages in India, with many regional languages experiencing reduced domains of use and declining intergenerational transmission. The paper argues that India's linguistic landscape represents a critical case study in understanding how global languages impact local linguistic ecologies, requiring nuanced policy approaches that balance global connectivity with cultural preservation. The research contributes to broader discussions about linguistic diversity in an increasingly interconnected world, highlighting the need for policies that recognize both the instrumental value of English and the intrinsic worth of regional languages in maintaining cultural identity and cognitive diversity.

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**Keywords:-** Linguistic Imperialism, Language Policy, Three Language Formula, Language Endangerment, Multilingualism, India.

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## Introduction

India stands as one of the world's most linguistically diverse nations, with Greenberg's diversity index of 0.914, meaning two people selected at random from the country will have different native languages in 91.4% of cases. This extraordinary linguistic richness encompasses 780 languages according to the People's Linguistic Survey of India, representing multiple language families and centuries of cultural evolution. However, this linguistic heritage faces unprecedented challenges in the contemporary era, as English continues to be considered the language essential for knowledge, scientific advancement and development.

The relationship between English and Indian regional languages cannot be understood as merely a contemporary phenomenon of globalization. Rather, it represents a complex historical trajectory that began with British colonial rule and has evolved through India's post-

independence language policies to its current position in a globalized world. Three contact languages have played an important role in the history of India in chronological order: Sanskrit, Persian and English, with each leaving distinct imprints on the linguistic landscape.

This paper addresses the central research question: How has the global dominance of English affected the vitality, usage patterns, and intergenerational transmission of regional languages in India, and what are the implications for linguistic diversity and cultural identity? The significance of this inquiry extends beyond India's borders, as the country's experience offers insights into how postcolonial multilingual societies navigate the tension between global integration and cultural preservation.

The analysis proceeds through an examination of theoretical frameworks from sociolinguistics and language policy studies, followed by an investigation of India's language policies, an assessment of current impacts on regional languages, and a discussion of the broader implications for linguistic diversity and cultural identity.

## **Theoretical Grounding**

### **Linguistic Imperialism and Language Ecology**

This study draws primarily on Robert Phillipson's theory of linguistic imperialism, which conceptualizes the spread of English as a form of structural and cultural domination that parallels economic and political imperialism. Phillipson's framework helps explain how English is considered to be the language essential for knowledge, scientific advancement and development while regional languages become marginalized in domains of power and prestige.

The theoretical foundation extends to Haugen's language ecology model, which examines languages as components of complex systems where changes in one element affect the entire ecosystem. In India's linguistic ecology, contact with other languages per se is not a driver of language loss. However, greater road density, which may encourage population movement, is associated with increased endangerment, suggesting that infrastructure development and urbanization create conditions favourable to linguistic homogenization.

### **Language Policy and Planning Theory**

Spolsky's language policy framework, encompassing language practices, beliefs, and management, provides analytical tools for understanding how English has achieved its dominant position in India. The framework illuminates the disconnect between official multilingual policies and actual language practices, where English is the de facto national language of India despite constitutional provisions for linguistic diversity.

Cooper's language planning typology—distinguishing between status planning, corpus planning, and acquisition planning—helps explain how English has gained prestige (status planning) while regional languages struggle with standardization (corpus planning) and transmission (acquisition planning) in formal educational contexts.

## **Analysis: The Three Language Formula and Policy Implementation**

### **Historical Development and Current Framework**

India's primary language policy instrument, the Three Language Formula (TLF), was first formed in 1968 by the Ministry of Education of the Government of India. The policy mandates that students learn three languages: the regional language (mother tongue or the state language), Hindi as the national language, and English as an international language.

However, implementation has been highly uneven across states. Tamil Nadu and other southern states have resisted the formula, viewing it as an imposition of Hindi hegemony. States like Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and Tripura, have opposed the implementation of the three-

language formula contained in the National Education Policy 2020 and have talked about forceful imposition of Hindi.

### Implementation Challenges and Regional Variations

The TLF faces several structural challenges that effectively privilege English over regional languages:

Table 1: Three Language Formula Implementation Patterns by Region

Region	Language 1	Language 2	Language 3	Implementation Issues
Northern States	Hindi	English	Regional/Sanskrit	Sanskrit chosen for easy marks; limited functional multilingualism
Southern States	Regional Language	English	Hindi (contested)	Strong resistance to Hindi; preference for English
North-eastern States	Regional Language	English	Hindi (imposed)	Union home minister announced Hindi will be made compulsory in all the states of that region
Tribal Areas	Dominant Regional	Hindi	English	Mother tongue excluded; tribal child receives instructions only in the national or the dominant regional language

The paradox of the TLF becomes evident when examining actual language acquisition outcomes. Hindi speaking areas chose an easy way out. They introduced Sanskrit as the third language. Students were bribed into opting for it as they were assured of high marks in it. Generations of students who passed out do not have a rudimentary knowledge of Sanskrit.

### The Medium of Instruction Debate

The choice of medium of instruction represents perhaps the most critical factor affecting regional language vitality. From a look at educational preferences in India, the medium of instruction preferred by most from the primary stage onward is the one most valued at the higher stages of education: English.

This preference creates a cascading effect where those students graduating from vernacular medium higher education institutes may struggle to find jobs, reinforcing the perception that regional languages lack instrumental value in modern economic contexts.

### Interpretation: Impacts on Regional Language Vitality

#### Language Endangerment and Loss

The quantitative impact of English dominance on Indian regional languages is substantial and measurable. As per the UNESCO Report of 2010, about 197 languages are endangered, out of which 81 are vulnerable, 63 are definitely endangered, 06 severely endangered, 42 critically endangered and 05 are extinct languages.

The endangerment follows predictable patterns linked to English-dominant education and urbanization:

Table 2: Language Endangerment Categories in India

UNESCO Category	Number of Languages	Characteristics	Primary Threat Factors
Vulnerable	81	Spoken by children but restricted to home	English-medium schooling
Definitely Endangered	63	Children no longer learning as mother tongue	Urban migration, education policy
Severely Endangered	6	Spoken only by grandparents	Complete shift to English/Hindi
Critically Endangered	42	Only elderly speakers remain	Socioeconomic pressure
Extinct	5	No remaining speakers	Historical language loss

## **Intergenerational Transmission Patterns**

The shift toward English creates disrupted transmission patterns where the younger generation opting for Malayalam. Only two people remain who speak this language which is a blend of Telugu, Tulu, Kannada, and Malayalam, exemplifying how regional languages lose speakers across generations.

Research in Odisha reveals that mother tongue education plays a significant role in the early childhood learning experience and subjects like Math and Science can be better understood in the mother language, yet policy implementation remains challenging due to teacher inadequacy and lack of proper training.

## **Socioeconomic Stratification and Language Choice**

English functions as a gatekeeper for social mobility, creating what scholars term "linguistic capital." English is a language that allows a certain social and economic mobility; an access to an entire culture that one may aspire to. This positioning reinforces existing inequalities, as the language remains inaccessible to those who are disadvantaged because of their economic situation, their caste, or both.

The result is a stratified linguistic market where regional languages become associated with lower socioeconomic status, creating what Bourdieu would recognize as symbolic violence against regional linguistic communities.

## **Cultural and Cognitive Implications**

The marginalization of regional languages carries profound implications for cultural transmission and cognitive diversity. Many minority communities associate their disadvantaged social and economic position with their ancestral culture and language. Speakers of minority community abandon their language and consequently their culture in the hope of overcoming discrimination.

This abandonment represents more than linguistic change; it constitutes what UNESCO terms "cultural genocide," where the unanimously adapted 'Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity' recognized a relationship between cultural diversity and biological diversity.

## **Implications: Toward Sustainable Multilingualism**

### **Rethinking Language Policy Architecture**

The current policy framework requires fundamental reconceptualization to address the complex realities of linguistic diversity. For the speaker of (linguistic) minority languages the three-language formula became a four-language formula as they had to learn their mother tongue, the dominant regional language, English and Hindi.

A more equitable approach would recognize what researcher's term "additive multilingualism" rather than "subtractive multilingualism," where new languages supplement rather than replace existing linguistic repertoires.

### **Technology and Language Revitalization**

Digital technologies offer unprecedented opportunities for regional language maintenance and revitalization. The policy recommends the use of digital resources to create teaching and learning materials in regional and native Indian languages. However, many schools do not use them due to financial constraints, highlighting the need for systematic digital infrastructure development.

### **Economic Models for Language Sustainability**

The paper argues for economic models that recognize the value of linguistic diversity. Rather than viewing regional languages as obstacles to development, policy frameworks should

recognize their role in local knowledge systems, cultural tourism, and community-based enterprises.

Table 3: Comparative Language Vitality Indicators

Language Family	Number of Languages	Endangered Languages	Revitalization Efforts	Economic Integration Potential
Indo-Aryan	140	45	Government support, digital resources	High (demographic advantage)
Dravidian	84	38	Strong regional movements	High (political mobilization)
Sino-Tibetan	148	89	Limited documentation	Medium (geographic challenges)
Austro-Asiatic	32	20	UNESCO initiatives	Low (small populations)
Andamanese	14	12	Emergency documentation	Low (critical endangerment)

### Global Perspectives and Best Practices

International experiences offer valuable insights for India's linguistic challenges. Countries like Wales (with Welsh language revitalization) and Canada (with French language protection) demonstrate that proactive policies can reverse language shift even in the presence of dominant global languages.

The key insight from these cases is that successful language maintenance requires not just educational policy but comprehensive societal support, including economic incentives, media representation, and institutional recognition.

### Conclusion

This analysis reveals that the impact of English as a global language on Indian regional languages represents a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to simple narratives of linguistic imperialism or modernization. While English undoubtedly provides opportunities for global integration and socioeconomic advancement, its hegemonic position has contributed to the endangerment of nearly 200 regional languages and the disruption of intergenerational transmission patterns across multiple linguistic communities.

The research demonstrates that current language policies, particularly the Three Language Formula, fail to adequately protect linguistic diversity while paradoxically creating additional burdens for speakers of minority languages. The evidence suggests that policy frameworks require fundamental reconceptualization to move beyond zero-sum conceptualizations of language use toward models that recognize the additive value of multilingualism.

Three critical conclusions emerge from this analysis. First, the sustainability of India's linguistic diversity requires recognition that regional languages possess intrinsic value beyond their instrumental utility, serving as repositories of cultural knowledge and cognitive diversity. Second, effective language policy must address the structural inequalities that position English as the sole pathway to socioeconomic advancement, creating alternative mechanisms for social mobility that incorporate regional languages. Third, technological innovations and digital infrastructure development offer unprecedented opportunities for language revitalization, but only if accompanied by systematic resource allocation and community engagement.

The implications extend beyond India's borders to broader questions about linguistic diversity in an interconnected world. As other multilingual societies grapple with similar challenges, India's experience offers both cautionary examples and innovative possibilities for sustaining linguistic diversity while engaging with global communication networks.

Future research should examine the effectiveness of specific revitalization programs, the role of diaspora communities in language maintenance, and the potential for economic

models that create value from linguistic diversity. Additionally, longitudinal studies of language transmission patterns in different socioeconomic contexts could provide crucial insights for policy development.

The ultimate challenge lies in developing what this paper terms "sustainable multilingualism"—language ecologies that support both global connectivity and local linguistic diversity. India's success or failure in meeting this challenge will have profound implications not only for its own cultural heritage but for global understandings of how societies can navigate the tension between integration and diversity in an increasingly connected world.

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