

A Language Without Limits

By Deena Kamel

Hinglish, Chinglish and Arabizi among variations as spoken English undergoes a revolution in the GTA [Greater Toronto Area]. That eve-teasing man thinks he's such a ranjha, but he's really a badmash. Chi-chi. In other words: "The man who sexually harasses women thinks he's such a Romeo, but he's really ill-mannered. Ick." That sentence, with its Hindi-English mix, might have folks at Merriam-Webster scratching their heads.

But all around the GTA, if you listen carefully, you'll hear English increasingly spiced with flavours from foreign languages. Hinglish, Chinglish and Arabizi are just a few of the variations. With its ethnic neighbourhoods, Toronto is the perfect city for a revolution in spoken English, historically an "absorbent language." The language we are hearing today will be very different from the English we will speak in future, as we borrow more words from dominant languages like Hindi or Chinese.

Academics call this mid-conversation and mid-sentence hybridization "code switching." It is disliked by some native English speakers, but not by language experts. "It is perfectly normal and linguistically fascinating, but people sometimes find it embarrassing," says Jack Chambers, professor of sociolinguistics at the University of Toronto. "They think it is a sign of incompetence when it is really a sign of resiliency and creativity."

Siham Ben, 27, a Moroccan medical student, came to Canada when she was 7. She switches between English and Arabic, producing a hybrid dubbed by Jordanian youth as Arabizi—a slang term for Arabic and "Inglizi" or "English" in Arabic.

"I don't feel it when I'm doing it," says the Toronto resident. "I don't pay attention to it." Ben, code-switching is a way of maintaining her identity. "I feel Moroccan first, then Canadian second. If I don't use Arabic first, I don't feel true to myself. It's a way of coping with life here."

Zina Alobaydi, 20, is a telecommunications sales representative living in Scarborough. "I feel my head is a dictionary," she says, as she thinks in Arabic and speaks in English. Alobaydi speaks the Iraqi dialect with her parents, as a sign of respect to them, but uses Arabizi with her friends. Alobaydi uses more Arabic, with its richness and depth, to express emotions that cannot be conveyed as well in English.

"Take the word 'bahr' for example," she says letting the word for 'sea' roll in her mouth. "It gives you the feeling of a big, unlimited space. It has an echo. It rhymes in your head and stays there." But she uses English when talking about culturally taboo subjects, such as dating, which are harder for her to convey in Arabic.

Hinglish, a lively hybrid spread quickly by the Internet and satellite channels, is the language of globalization. In 2004, David Crystal, a British linguist at the University of Wales, predicted that the world's 350 million Hinglish speakers may soon outnumber native English speakers in the United States and United Kingdom.

About eight years ago, Telus started to run Hinglish ads as part of a campaign to reach out to Canada's growing South Asian communities. The ads appeared in South Asian and ethnic print and broadcast media including Can-India News, Voice Weekly, and Hindi outlets abroad as well as Omni Television, according to Telus spokesperson A.J. Gratton. But with the popular mixing of Hindi and English, we may even be seeing Hinglish ads in Canadian mainstream media in future, says Telus marketing director Tracy Lim.

Pepsi ran a campaign in India with the slogan 'Yeh Dil Maange More!' (this heart wants more) and Coke followed with 'Life Ho To Aisi' (life should be this way).

A dictionary of the hybrid, *The Queen's Hinglish: How to speak Pukka*, was compiled in 2006 by Baljinder Mahal, a teacher from Derby in England.

Rena Helms-Park, an associate professor of linguistics at the University of Toronto, Scarborough, says code-switching creates a "rapport" that unifies the community. It can also be subversive. In post-colonial countries speakers are trying to reclaim English in their own way, to create a new national identity. "It's not a lesser English, it's one type of world English," Helms-Park says.

Indian writer Raja Rao writes: "We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or American."

English has always been a sponge language. Since it was written down in the year 700, it has adopted words from Norse, French and Latin, among others. English now has up to 700,000 words—more than almost any other language, according to Chambers. "That's a direct consequence of international scope, the fact that English has travelled so far around the world and mixed with so many other cultures and has absorbed influences from all those other cultures. It has been an amazingly tolerant language." Now there is an explosion in English vocabulary comparable to the development of its syntax in the 1400s and 1500s, when the printing press was invented.

"Some people feel threatened because the standard isn't adhered to across the board," Helms-Park says. "There are lots of purists out there." But times change, and with them, language. "In a sense it is a true reflection of the 21st century where immigration of groups, permanent crossing of national boundaries, is one of the constants of our lifestyle. The English language has a head start over lots of other languages because it already is so cosmopolitan in its constituents," Chambers says. Peering into the future, Helms-Park said written English will remain stable, but we will see a "melting pot of Englishes" in Canada rather than pockets of Hinglish or Chinglish. "What we end up with is more local colour."

Shoofihada, mezeiwan. LOOK AT THIS, IT'S NICE.

Ahlain, Keefak? HI, HOW ARE YOU?

Dim ah lei? HOW ARE YOU?

Source: Kamel, Deena. 2008. "A Language without Limits." *Toronto Star*. 19 August 2008.

Text 2

English grows into strange shapes when transplanted into foreign soil

By Ben Macintyre

LAST WEEK THE THINK-TANK DEMOS came up with a revolutionary new approach to the language — given the spread of hybrid forms of English, instead of insisting that new arrivals to this country learn standard English, it said, they should be taught such variations as Spanglish (Spanish-English), Hinglish (Hindi/Punjabi/Urdu-English) and Chinglish (Chinese-English).

Foisting a dollop of post-colonial guilt on to the mother tongue, the report argued that British attitudes to the language are “better suited to the days of the British Empire than the modern world”. Rather than regard English as a uniquely British invention to be defended, the British should see themselves as “just one of many shareholders in a global asset”.

I love the strange shapes into which English grows when transplanted into foreign soil, and the varieties of words that we import from the subspecies. “Chuddies”, the Hinglish for underpants, is only one of the most recent adoptions from India, following a long and honourable tradition of pyjamas, bungalows and kedgerees.

“Long time no see”, now standard English, was once a literal translation from Chinese to English. But to leap from an appreciation of English in all its hybrid forms to the notion that these should be accorded equal status with standard English in England seems faintly perverse, and a misunderstanding of the organic way in which language evolves.

Latin provided the root for a multitude of languages. The same is undoubtedly true of English. But I don’t recall any Roman thinker suggesting that the bastardised and regionalised forms of the language spoken in such outposts as, say, Britain, should be taught in Roman schools.

Maintaining and preserving a standard form of English is not merely “Little Englishism”: employers and governments need to know that there is a correct way to use English, as do new learners. Demos suggests abandoning the Oxford English Dictionary as the repository of true English, and replacing it with a website to which anyone could contribute “English” words and definitions. Such a project would be fascinating, but not English: the outcome would be an informal lingua franca, a sprawling form of communication derived from English, but hardly a language.

English is spreading faster, and in a richer variety of ways, than any language in history. French schoolchildren refer, not just to “le weekend” and “le MacDo”, but use words of much more recent vintage: “le reality TV”, “le hoodie” and “le handsfree”.

Millions of Chinese use English as a second language, with the result that the largest proportion of new words being coined in everyday English are Chinese in origin. Some have been adopted into Mandarin. “drinktea”, meaning “closed” and derived from a Mandarin word, “torunbusiness”, meaning “open”. Where once such terms might have been absorbed slowly, the internet means that they circulate with astonishing speed. In the 1960s, there were some 250 million English speakers, mostly in the US, Britain and former colonies; today there are approximately the same number of Chinese with at least some grasp of English.

One of the most fertile and gorgeous English adaptations is Indian-English, a vigorous hybrid with its own syntax and vocabulary. English use is expanding more rapidly in India than at any time since its arrival on the subcontinent, fulfilling the novelist Raja Rao’s prediction that Indian-English is “a dialect which will one day prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American”. There is a delightful internal rhythm to Indian-English. Rather than wash one’s hair, an Indian may take a “headbath”; sexual harassment is “eve-teasing”, a word at once less clinical and more suggestive than ours. In English we can only postpone an event; in India, we can “prepone” it, to bring it forward.

Lee Knapp, of Cambridge University’s English for Speakers of Other Languages examinations, argues that new forms of English (like the old) will have a gradual impact on the standard tongue. “The varieties (of English) are an expression of human communities,” he says. “It’s more likely they will be no different to the colloquial language of the UK, providing words and language use which will change the dictionaries over time.”

Applauding the adaptation of English in other countries should not mean abandoning a sense of where it comes from, or insisting that all forms are equal in this country. One cannot postpone the adoption of foreign forms of English—but there is no need to prepone it either.

If Chinglish must be taught in English schools, then teachers should also instruct pupils on playground patois, internet argot, Glasgow patter or any of the countless subsidiaries into which English has evolved. These are all interesting and valuable children of the mother tongue, but children nonetheless. To put that another way, there may be many shareholders in the English language, but there is only one CEO—Shakespeare.

Source: Macintyre, Ben. 2007. “English grows into strange shapes when transplanted into foreign soil.” *The Times*. March 24, 2007.



For further discussion

Consider the following questions in relation to these articles. Write a brief summary of the situation in your country, in response to some of the main points discussed.

- 1 In what ways do the articles above celebrate language diversity?
- 2 Are the articles critical of language diversity? Language blending? Language change?
- 3 What are the possible reasons for people who “code switch” to feel self-conscious about using language combinations in public?
- 4 Why would linguists be interested in studying language change?
- 5 What are the possible reasons for wanting to slow or stop the change of language use in a particular country?
- 6 How should public education, in a given country, handle the instruction of the dominant native language? How should educators approach language variations?

Activity

Do a language-use survey

On your own, with a partner, or with an entire class, carry out a language-use survey. What are the various languages spoken by students, parents, teachers, or others in your community? If English is widely spoken, what regional variations of English are spoken? What other variations of English are spoken and why? What is the reason for variations within a single community that you have chosen to survey?

Region and dialect

It is almost impossible to think of a monolithic, easily described community such as “nation” or “English language speakers” without starting to see the variations at work within these groups. Regional variation and social variation play a great role in creating communities and subcultures within larger states. Many cultural variations in language also serve to identify or unite—for good and bad—particular communities. As we have seen even in the articles about changes in the English language, difference in the form of dialect, accents, and word choice stand out and we tend to make judgments about these differences. Speakers of one dialect may look at another dialect from what many critics call the deficit model, or a way of viewing certain language variations as somehow inferior or deficient. From judging an accent it is a small step to broader prejudice.

The use of African American Vernacular English (or AAVE) in the United States is a good example of the complex role language plays in a culture. The United States still struggles with the legacy of slavery and the disadvantage among African American communities; this is reflected in the naming of the particular dialects spoken by many African Americans (which was recently more often referred to as Black Vernacular English). In the following activity, a series of short readings and questions, the existence and use of AAVE and issues concerning African Americans as a community and their relation to other communities, the importance of language in terms of community cohesion and identity, and the role of education are further discussed.

Activity

Research into IB language policy

The IB has a “language policy” and takes a stance on issues ranging from support to students with “complex language profiles” and mother tongue entitlement.

Find documents related to IB language policy. How do these policies define the nature of the IB community? How could this policy itself be part of the debate over language, community, and power? Creative ideas for a written task could follow from your research.

Activity

Dialect, identity, and power

Read the following passages, taking notes as you go along, and consider any guiding questions. Interrogate the texts, trying to uncover interesting features, ideas, and attitudes towards language and particular communities. At the same time note any interesting linguistic features or patterns.

Text 1

In 1993, the African American writer Toni Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. In its press release, the Nobel committee noted Morrison's narrative experimentation, the human spirit of her novels, and the range and quality of her work. The committee also made special mention that her work: "delves into the language itself, a language she wants to liberate from the fetters of race."

Read the following passage from her novel *Beloved* in which Morrison, through the eyes of one of the main characters, Suggs, describes the singing—and language—of another character, Paul D.

And wouldn't you know he'd be a singing man.

*Little rice, little bean,
No meat in between.
Hard work ain't easy,
Dry bread ain't greasy.*

He was us now and singing as he mended things he had broken the day before. Some old pieces of song he'd learned on the prison farm or in the War afterward. Nothing like what they sang at Sweet Home, where yearning fashioned every note.

The songs he knew from Georgia were flat-headed nails for pounding and pounding and pounding.

*Lay my head on the railroad line,
Train come along, pacify my mind.
If I had my weight in lime,
I'd whip my captain till he went stone blind.
Five-cent nickel,
Ten-cent dime,
Busting rocks is busting time.*

But they didn't fit, these songs. They were too loud, had too much power for the little house chores he was engaged in—resetting table legs; glazing.

He couldn't go back to "Storm upon the Waters" that they sang under the trees of Sweet Home, so he contented himself with mmmmmmmmm, throwing in a line if one occurred to him, and what occurred over and over was "Bare feet and chamomile sap,/Took off my shoes; took off my hat."

It was tempting to change the words (Gimme back my shoes; gimme back my hat), because he didn't believe he could live with a woman—any woman—for over two out of three months. That was about as long as he could abide in one place. ...

Source: Morrison, Toni. 1987. *Beloved*, New York: Vintage International. 2004. Kindle position 743–61.

Questions to the text

- 1 How would you describe the language and diction of the narrator?
- 2 How is the implied diction or vocabulary of the character Paul D. conveyed?
- 3 Why does he sing one kind of song as opposed to another?

Discussion Point

- What do you think it means to liberate language?
- How might language be enslaved, captured or restricted?
- Can a language be as enslaved as a person?

Text 2

In this excerpt from her 1993 Nobel Lecture, Toni Morrison describes the thoughts of a wise old woman trying to impart a lesson to young children while she contemplates language and the way it is "susceptible to death."

For her a dead language is not only one no longer spoken or written, it is unyielding language content to admire its own paralysis. Like statist language, censored and censoring. Ruthless in its policing duties, it has no desire or purpose other than maintaining the free range of its own narcotic narcissism, its own exclusivity and dominance. However moribund, it is not without effect for it actively thwarts the intellect, stalls conscience, suppresses human potential. Unreceptive to interrogation, it cannot form or tolerate new ideas, shape other thoughts, tell another story, fill baffling silences. Official language smitheryed to sanction ignorance and preserve privilege is a suit of armor polished to shocking glitter, a husk from which the knight departed long ago. Yet there it is: dumb, predatory, sentimental. Exciting reverence in schoolchildren, providing shelter for despots, summoning false memories of stability, harmony among the public.

She is convinced that when language dies, out of carelessness, disuse, indifference and absence of esteem, or killed by fiat, not only she herself, but all uses and makers are accountable for its demise. In her country children have bitten their tongues off and use bullets instead to iterate the voice of speechlessness, of disabled and disabling language, of language adults have abandoned altogether as a device for grappling with meaning, providing guidance, or expressing love. But she knows tongue-suicide is not only the choice of children. It is common among the infantile heads of state and power merchants whose evacuated language leaves them with no access to what is left of their human instincts for they speak only to those who obey, or in order to force obedience.

Questions to the text

- 1 Who is Morrison speaking to?
- 2 How would you describe her use of language and vocabulary?
- 3 Is the language academic? Literary? Inventive?
- 4 How would someone's language be stolen?

Text 3

DeAndre Cortez Way, better known by his stage name Soulja Boy Tell 'Em, or simply Soulja Boy, is an African American rapper and record producer. Following are the song lines from his 1998 single "Turn My Swag On."

Turn My Swag On

Soulja Boy tell 'em!
 Hopped up out the bed,
 Turn my swag on,
 Took a look in the mirror said what's up
 Yeah I'm getting money (oh) [x2]
 Turn my swag on,
 It's my turn, now turn it up
 Yeah, yeah
 I put my team on, and my theme song
 Now it's time to turn it up
 Yeah, yeah

I got a question why they hating on me,
 I got a question why they hating on me
 I ain't did nothing to 'em, but count this money
 And put my team on, now my whole clic stunning
 Boy what's up, yeah
 Boy what's up, yeah
 When I was 9 years old I put it in my head
 That I'm gonna die for this gold
 (Soulja Boy tell 'em)
 Boy what's up, yeah
 Hopped up out the bed
 Turn my swag on
 Took a look in the mirror said what's up
 Yeah I'm gettin money (ooh) [x2]
 I'm back again,
 I know a lot of you all thought I wasn't coming back ...
 Yeah, yeah
 I had to prove them wrong,
 Got back in the studio and came up with another hit
 Yeah, yeah
 I told the world my story, the world where I'm from
 Souljaboy X L dot com, boy what's up
 Yeah, yeah

Now everytime you see me spit
 Every time you hear me rhyme
 Everytime you see me in your state or town
 Say what's up
 Yeah, yeah

Hopped up out the bed
 Turn my swag on
 Took a look in the mirror said what's up
 Yeah I'm gettin money (ooh) [x2]

Source: Soulja Boy Tell 'Em. 2008. *iSouljaBoyTellem*, ColliPark Music/Interscope Records.

Questions to the text

- 1 How much of the vocabulary do you understand in this song?
- 2 Does this song belong to a particular community or to a variety of communities?
- 3 For whom is this song written or performed? To whom is this song marketed? By whom?
- 4 Does this song go against a dominant community, or along with it?

Activity

Image analysis: comparison and contrast

The novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe was first published in 1852 to promote the anti-slavery movement. The book was extremely popular throughout the century. While the novel is at times credited with helping the effort to abolish slavery in the United States, the portrayal of the characters in the work itself and the plays and musicals based on the original, are often seen as promoting negative stereotypes of African Americans. How do the images on the poster juxtapose with the images on the quilt created by Harriet Powers, an African American artist, active in the same time period?



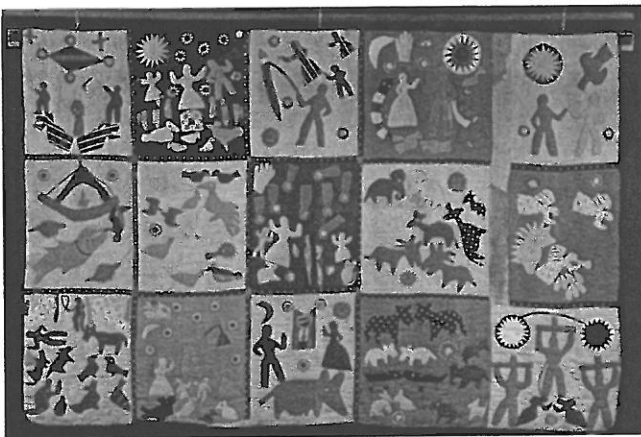
Discussion Point

Many of the concerns raised in a discussion of regional variation, dialect, class, and the multiplicity of communities are related to the decisions we make about belonging

- 1 How limited are we by the languages that we are able to speak?
- 2 How is our membership in a community tied to identity?
- 3 How is our identity tied to language?
- 4 How flexible is our identity? You will have the chance to explore some of these questions in the next section of this chapter.



A lithograph from 1899 promoting the stage show of Uncle Tom's Cabin.



A quilt by Harriet Powers, 1895–98.

Activity

Class project

Study the English language and literature of a particular dialect or region

Explore the use of a particular regional variation or dialect of English and the issues that surround its use. Try to find the widest variety of texts that either use that particular dialect or comment upon it. Some further questions you might consider to support your research:

- How is this dialect primarily used? Is its use related to region? Race? Gender? Class? In what form is it usually expressed? Is its use primarily oral? Literary? Or, does it more frequently come across in popular culture, such as traditional folk songs?

Write an opinion piece on the value of these texts for further research and analysis.