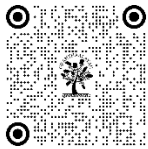


SPEECH AND STRATEGY: UNPACKING POLITICAL POWER IN INDIA THROUGH THE LANGUAGE OF POWER

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ABSTRACT

Language plays a pivotal role in shaping political power dynamics within India's complex and diverse linguistic landscape. In a country with a multitude of languages and dialects, political parties—both national and regional—use language as a tool to influence, mobilize, and maintain control over various constituencies. This analysis delves into the rhetorical techniques employed by these parties, focusing on strategies such as circumlocution, deliberate ambiguity, language shifting, and the ongoing debates surrounding language policy. These tools are carefully deployed to frame policies, assert and reinforce regional identities, signal social reform orientations, justify controversial actions, and extend political appeal across a broad spectrum of voters. By examining case studies, the paper demonstrates how language is integral to political messaging, enabling parties to position themselves strategically within the competitive electoral landscape. Additionally, it highlights the role of language in shaping political discourse, influencing public perception, and maintaining power structures at both the regional and national levels. This study provides valuable insights into the deeper regional tensions, social reform movements, and the intricate power relations that underpin India's political system, underscoring the significant impact of language in shaping the nation's political future.

Keywords: Deliberate Ambiguity, Dialects, Rhetorical Technique, Language Policy, Regional Identities, Electoral Landscape



1. INTRODUCTION

Language plays a pivotal role in shaping political discourse and power dynamics in India, a country characterized by immense linguistic diversity and regional variations. Politicians in India strategically use language to influence public sentiment, craft ideological narratives, and mobilize support across various voter bases. Rhetorical strategies such as circumlocution, deliberate ambiguity, code-switching, and linguistic framing are frequently employed to reflect and address the nation's complex socio-political realities. These linguistic techniques go beyond mere communication tools; they function as instruments for constructing political identities, negotiating power, and articulating policies. For example, national parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Indian National Congress (INC), as well as regional parties like the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS), Telugu Desam Party (TDP), Shiv Sena, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), and All India Trinamool Congress (TMC), adapt their language to connect with different segments of the electorate, often adjusting their discourse in response to regional, cultural, and demographic shifts. Furthermore, debates surrounding political correctness, language policies, and the use of vernacular languages further complicate the linguistic landscape, revealing how language intersects with issues of identity, governance, and political power. This paper explores how language shapes political strategies, sustains regional allegiances, and influences electoral outcomes, highlighting the critical role of rhetoric in India's evolving political landscape.

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2. CIRCUMLOCUTION AND CONTROVERSIAL POLICIES: THE STRATEGIC USE OF LANGUAGE IN INDIAN POLITICAL RHETORIC

Circumlocution is often used by Indian politicians to sanitize controversial policies and present them in a more palatable light for the public. Political leaders across the ideological spectrum strategically employ indirect language to reframe contentious issues, ensuring broader acceptance while minimizing backlash. For example, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, popularized the term "surgical strike" to describe cross-border military operations. This term framed the military action as precise and restrained, avoiding more aggressive language like "attack," which could provoke both domestic and international criticism.

Similarly, during the Emergency under Indira Gandhi, the Congress party used the term "family planning" to veil its coercive sterilization campaigns, presenting them as public health initiatives rather than violations of individual rights. This linguistic reframing allowed the Congress party to sidestep criticism and maintain political legitimacy during a highly controversial period.

In Telangana, the Indian National Congress (INC), with Revanth Reddy as the current state party president, employs circumlocution to reframe welfare schemes aimed at key voter groups like farmers and women. The Congress uses terms like "development packages" or "economic upliftment" to portray schemes like direct cash transfers as long-term investments, avoiding the direct association with electoral populism.

In Andhra Pradesh, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), led by N. Chandrababu Naidu, continues to employ circumlocution when discussing policies such as affirmative action for marginalized communities. The TDP refers to these initiatives as "empowerment programs" rather than directly addressing "reservations" or "preferential treatment." This re-framing presents these policies as efforts to uplift disadvantaged groups while sidestepping more controversial language.

In Maharashtra, after the split in Shiv Sena, the faction led by Eknath Shinde formed an alliance with the BJP, assuming control of the state. The Shiv Sena, particularly under the leadership of Shinde, often uses terms like "Maharashtrian pride" or "Marathi identity" to justify regional autonomy, focusing on issues like local resource control, while avoiding direct confrontations with the central government.

Similarly, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), led by Arvind Kejriwal, often uses terms like "transformation" and "people-centric policies" to frame its governance in Delhi and Punjab as a departure from traditional political corruption, framing its policies as progressive and reform-oriented rather than merely populist.

These examples illustrate how circumlocution is strategically employed by political parties such as the BJP, Congress, TDP, Shiv Sena, and AAP to present controversial policies in a sanitized light. By carefully choosing their language, these parties aim to garner public support, maintain political legitimacy, and mitigate the potential for backlash, highlighting the power of rhetoric in shaping political narratives in India.

3. EVASIVE LANGUAGE: DISTORTING CONTROVERSIAL REALITIES IN INDIAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Evasive language, the intentional use of vague or indirect terms to conceal uncomfortable truths, plays a significant role in Indian political discourse across various parties. Politicians strategically employ this technique to deflect responsibility and manage public perception of sensitive events or policy failures. For example, when incidents of state-sponsored violence or police brutality occur, terms such as "law and order measures" or "police engagement" are frequently used by ruling parties to justify excessive force, framing it as an unavoidable response rather than acknowledging human rights violations. This linguistic tactic protects the government from accountability, presenting violent actions as necessary to maintain peace, even when they involve the abuse of power.

The BJP similarly uses evasive language to undermine political opposition by labeling them as "anti-national." While these terms may be legally acceptable, their real purpose is to delegitimize rivals by painting them as enemies of the state, thereby justifying crackdowns on dissent while maintaining an appearance of lawful governance.

The Congress party also resorts to ambiguous language when addressing past mistakes or scandals. Phrases like "mistakes were made" allow them to acknowledge failures without accepting direct responsibility, distancing individuals

or the party from the actions that led to public dissatisfaction. Such vague expressions help the party avoid facing the full consequences of its previous governance.

Similarly, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in Delhi employs evasive language when dealing with ongoing issues like pollution or governance challenges. Rather than taking responsibility for these problems, the party uses ambiguous language to minimize political fallout without acknowledging its own role in the situation.

Evasive language, therefore, becomes a crucial tool for political parties such as the BJP, Congress, and AAP, allowing them to sidestep accountability for controversial actions or policies. Through the use of vague and indirect terms, these parties can maintain power, manipulate public perception, and evade genuine scrutiny in India's complex political landscape.

4. LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL REFORM: SIGNALING IDEOLOGICAL SHIFTS IN INDIAN POLITICS

The evolving norms of language usage in India, particularly in the context of political correctness, play a significant role in shaping public discourse around social reform movements and party ideologies. The way political parties adapt their language reflects both shifting social values and their positioning on key issues related to marginalization, identity, and justice.

For instance, recognizing the historical discrimination against Dalit communities, parties like the BSP and SP have consciously adopted the term "Dalit" (meaning "oppressed") to replace historically patronizing terms like "Harijan" (Children of God), which were popularized by Mahatma Gandhi. This shift in terminology is part of a broader effort to acknowledge Dalits' struggles for dignity and equality, emphasizing empowerment rather than perpetuating the subjugation of marginalized communities.

The feminist movement also catalyzed a shift away from sexist and derogatory language in Indian politics. Political leaders now face scrutiny for using misogynistic language, and there is an increasing push to adopt more inclusive and respectful terminology. Despite these efforts, there are ongoing debates about the limits of political correctness, especially in areas such as gender rights, minority welfare, and caste-based injustices. While Congress has largely embraced inclusive messaging, avoiding elitist or discriminatory language, BJP leaders have resisted implementing substantial controls on the use of provocative rhetoric, especially when it comes to religious minorities like Muslims and Christians.

The issue of language also plays out differently at the regional level. For example, Shiv Sena in Maharashtra continues to employ the term "Bhumiputra" (sons of the soil), which has been used to promote a sense of exclusivity and chauvinism, particularly targeting economic migrants from other states. In contrast, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh has made concerted efforts to avoid invoking painful memories associated with the Anti-Hindi Agitation of the 1960s, when the state rejected the imposition of Hindi as a national language.

Overall, these examples illustrate how political parties across India, whether national or regional, use language as a tool to signal their positions on important social issues. The adaptation of language norms related to caste, gender, and migration reflects the parties' broader ideological orientations and their approach to social reform.

5. LANGUAGE POLITICS: REGIONAL IDENTITY VERSUS NATIONAL UNITY

The complex debates surrounding language policy in India are intrinsically linked to deeper political tensions between regional socio-cultural identities and assertions of centralized Indian nationalism. One prominent aspect of this tension is the continued official usage of English in governance, legislation, and higher education, a legacy of British colonial rule. This policy has led to the perpetuation of an elite institutional framework that is seen as a remnant of colonial power structures. At the same time, efforts by Hindu nationalist groups, such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and their allies in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), advocate for the expansion of Hindi as the unifying national language. This push for Hindi dominance is framed as part of a broader vision of asserting a unified culture rooted in the "Hindi heartland" of North India.

The imposition of Hindi, however, has sparked considerable resistance from various regional parties, particularly those from the southern states. Dravidian parties like the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu, which has long been a vocal critic of centralized impositions from Delhi, have been at the forefront of this resistance. The DMK and other regional parties argue that promoting Hindi, a language linked to Sanskrit and the North Indian cultural ethos,

undermines the rich linguistic and cultural traditions of the Dravidian South. The DMK's founder, Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, strongly opposed the imposition of Hindi, seeing it as a tool for consolidating political power in the hands of the North Indian elite. His followers continue to highlight the cultural and historical significance of Tamil as a language of self-assertion against perceived hegemonic forces.

The charge that Hindi imposition disproportionately consolidates power in favor of the upper-caste communities of the Hindi-speaking North is one that remains central to Dravidian resistance. According to DMK leaders, the promotion of Hindi not only marginalizes regional identities but also strengthens the socio-political dominance of North India's Brahmanical culture, perpetuating inequalities, particularly in states like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Kerala. The rhetoric around language in Tamil Nadu, for example, has long focused on protecting Tamil as a "cultural symbol" of resistance against northern imposition. The late M. Karunanidhi, a key leader of the DMK, was known for his staunch opposition to Hindi imposition and advocated for Tamil's primacy in all forms of governance and education in the state.

This tension reached its peak in the 1960s during the Anti-Hindi Agitation, which saw mass protests and widespread opposition to the central government's attempt to make Hindi the sole official language. During this time, students, workers, and political leaders in Tamil Nadu mobilized under the banner of "Tamizh Vaazhi" (Long Live Tamil) to assert their linguistic and cultural rights. In 1965, the Tamil Nadu government passed the Tamil Official Language Act, which mandated the use of Tamil in all official state communications, further entrenching the idea of linguistic autonomy.

Similarly, in the Bengali-speaking state of West Bengal, debates around language policy have revolved around issues of Bengali cultural preservation and resistance to centralization. During the Bengali Language Movement in the 1950s, the issue of language was seen as directly tied to the identity and political autonomy of Bengalis. As a response to the imposition of Hindi by the central government, Bengali intellectuals and political leaders have emphasized the importance of their mother tongue in asserting their cultural and political autonomy.

Moreover, the rise of regionalism in Assam, Kerala, and other states has seen similar assertions of linguistic pride and resistance to Hindi dominance. Leaders like M. N. Roy and E. M. S. Namboodiripad were vocal about the need to resist the imposition of a single national language at the expense of regional linguistic identities. In Kerala, the use of Malayalam has long been seen as an essential part of the state's socio-political identity, and efforts to promote Hindi have faced significant opposition.

The national language debate continues to shape the political landscape, with widespread public protests against perceived impositions of Hindi, especially in southern states. The debate often pits regional ethno-linguistic identities—rooted in Tamil, Bengali, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, and other languages—against the centralized notion of a unified, pan-Indian identity that includes Hindi as a unifying force. These political flashpoints, particularly the sustained opposition from Dravidian parties like the DMK, AIADMK, and Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS), underscore the ongoing challenge of balancing regional autonomy with national unity.

At the heart of this conflict is the question of whether India can maintain a unified political identity while respecting its profound linguistic diversity. The outcomes of these debates—whether in the form of policy shifts, political resistance, or public protests—continue to influence the foundations of center-state relations, resource allocation, and governance. The debates over language policy, therefore, serve as a microcosm of the larger ideological struggle between regionalism and nationalism in India, influencing the trajectory of Indian federalism since independence and reshaping the political contours of the nation.

6. LINGUISTIC FLUIDITY: BROADENING POLITICAL MESSAGING APPEAL

The practice of linguistic fluidity, where politicians strategically shift between multiple languages, including regional vernaculars and English, has become an essential rhetorical tool in broadening political messaging and engaging diverse constituencies across India. This technique allows politicians to tailor their speeches to appeal to different socio-cultural groups, capitalizing on India's multilingual landscape.

For example, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is known for seamlessly transitioning between Hindi, English, and regional languages in his speeches. While addressing the grassroots, he often switches to Hindi or regional dialects, making his rhetoric resonate with local voters. When speaking to urban, educated audiences or in formal settings, he shifts to English, reinforcing his message's gravitas and appeal to the elite. This deliberate oscillation helps Modi maintain his connection with the common people while also positioning himself as a leader capable of engaging with global issues.

This bilingual approach has become a hallmark of Modi's campaign style, demonstrating his sensitivity to India's diverse linguistic fabric.

Similarly, Rahul Gandhi, leader of the Indian National Congress (INC), has consciously adopted simpler Hindi over the years to appeal to the Hindi-speaking electorate, particularly in the Hindi heartland. His shift from English-heavy speeches to more colloquial Hindi idioms reflects an effort to shed perceptions of elitism and better connect with rural and semi-urban voters, especially in states like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Bihar. This strategy was evident in the 2019 general elections, where Gandhi's use of Hindi idioms and populist rhetoric was intended to position him as a leader more in tune with India's grassroots, contrasting with the image of the Congress as a party of the elite.

At the regional level, parties like the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh use linguistic fluidity to strike a balance between modernity and tradition. N. Chandrababu Naidu, the party's leader, often incorporates English terms and technical jargon in his speeches, aiming to project an image of a modern, development-oriented leader. However, Naidu ensures that the core message is delivered in Telugu, maintaining his connection with the state's cultural identity. This blend of English and Telugu serves as a tactical tool to appeal to both the educated urban population and the more traditional rural voters, aligning with the party's dual focus on technological advancement and regional pride.

Another notable example of linguistic fluidity comes from Mamata Banerjee, Chief Minister of West Bengal and leader of the Trinamool Congress (TMC). Banerjee often switches between Bengali and Hindi, using the former to resonate deeply with her regional Bengali constituency while strategically employing Hindi to assert her presence in national political discourse. This language shift enables her to solidify her position in the state while navigating the national political arena.

Linguistic fluidity in political discourse is not limited to India. For instance, Republican Party leaders in the United States often adjust their language based on the audience. When addressing Evangelical voters, they use religious terminology, while for broader suburban or rural audiences, they shift to moralistic "heartland" language. This strategic use of language helps leaders resonate with diverse voter segments while reinforcing shared cultural values.

Such examples from both India and the U.S. underscore how political leaders worldwide use linguistic fluidity to adapt their messaging for different socio-economic and cultural groups. This tactic helps them maximize appeal across regional, educational, and ideological divides, ultimately aiding in electoral success. In India, where language is tied closely to identity, culture, and politics, this practice plays a critical role in shaping and expanding political narratives to secure a broader voter base.

7. DIGITAL DISCOURSE: LANGUAGE IN ONLINE CAMPAIGNING AND VOTER MOBILIZATION IN INDIA

The rise of digital campaigning in India has significantly transformed political discourse, providing political parties with direct access to voters via platforms like Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram. These platforms foster short, impactful, and viral messaging, especially in a socio-linguistically diverse nation like India, where language plays a crucial role in shaping political narratives.

Impact of Memes and Hashtags: Memes and hashtags such as #ModiHaiTohMumkinHai and #ChowkidarChorHai have become central to political campaigns, simplifying messages and engaging younger, internet-savvy voters. The BJP's use of memes in Hindi and regional languages exemplifies a strategy to connect with a broad demographic, leveraging humor and satire.

WhatsApp and Messaging Groups: WhatsApp has become essential for political communication, particularly in rural areas. Parties like the BJP and AAP use localized content in regional dialects to create more authentic and personal connections with voters. This approach helps build credibility and strengthens electoral outreach.

Micro-targeting and Language: Political campaigns now leverage data analytics to tailor messages to specific linguistic and cultural groups. The BJP's use of regional languages like Hindi, Tamil, and Bengali for targeted messaging is a prime example of this strategy, enhancing voter engagement and making campaigns more localized.

Influence on Voter Mobilization: Digital platforms bypass traditional media, allowing parties to directly reach voters. The BJP has utilized digital platforms to promote Hindu nationalist narratives, while opposition parties like Congress focus on secularism and human rights, tailoring messages to appeal to specific voter bases, such as rural farmers.

Impact of Online Disinformation: Language manipulation plays a significant role in spreading disinformation through digital platforms, where both ruling and opposition parties have been accused of using inflammatory language to mobilize voters along emotional and religious lines.

Transnational Influence: Global trends in digital campaigning, including micro-targeting, social media trolling, and the use of bots, have influenced Indian political campaigns. Similar strategies seen in the US and Brazil have been adopted in India, shaping the language used in campaigns to resonate with emotionally charged issues like national security and identity politics.

8. CONCLUSION: LANGUAGE AS A TOOL FOR POLITICAL POWER AND IDENTITY IN INDIA

In conclusion, a thorough examination of recurring linguistic strategies, rhetorical techniques, and points of discursive tension provides critical insight into the underlying motivations, political positioning, ideological fault lines, and power structures that shape India's complex political landscape. Sanitizing language, for instance, serves as a strategic tool for political parties across the spectrum to reframe controversial policies in a more palatable light, helping to garner public support. Meanwhile, evasive language is frequently used to obscure uncomfortable truths, limit transparency, and evade accountability, particularly in cases of governance failures or instances of state-led violence.

The debates surrounding political correctness further reflect the evolving social justice orientations of different parties, signaling their commitment (or lack thereof) to progressive reform. High-stakes conflicts over language policy protections, such as the imposition of Hindi versus the preservation of regional languages, illustrate the deeper tensions between centralized nationalism and assertive sub-national identities, which are central to India's federal structure. Additionally, the practice of linguistic flexibility allows parties to tailor their messages across linguistic divides, strategically appealing to diverse voter bases, from grassroots communities to more elite constituencies.

As this analysis has shown, through national and regional case studies, language is not only a tool for communication but also a vehicle for political power, identity assertion, and electoral mobilization. In a socio-linguistically diverse country like India, understanding how language is employed across political divides is essential for comprehending the dynamics of policy-making, regional tensions, and the broader power structures in Indian democracy. Thus, analyzing the linguistic strategies of political actors provides invaluable insight into the motivations, regional conflicts, reform agendas, and underlying power dynamics that continue to shape the political landscape of the world's largest democracy.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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