

# **Code-switching as a communicative strategy for international audience comprehensibility in ‘Slumdog Millionaire’**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Code-switching as a communicative strategy can be perceived as an achievement strategy in Slumdog Millionaire, a 2008 British film directed by Danny Boyle, written by Simon Beaufoy, co-directed in India by Loveleen Tandan. It is largely used in order to get meaning across to an international audience. Code-switching is a communicative strategy often used in this movie, which was filmed in India. Slumdog Millionaire tells the story of a young man from the slums of Mumbai who appears on the Indian version of Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? Director Boyle, must have realized the value of the use of the English language in Slumdog Millionaire. The switches to English enabled international comprehensibility. Drawing from Gumperz’s (1982) code-switching as a discourse strategy and Giles’ (1978) Accommodation Theory, we provide examples from the movie to explain reasons for code-switching.*

*KEYWORDS: code-switching, communicative strategy, accommodation*

## **1. Introduction**

It is obvious that since the Hollywood movie industry is located in an English speaking country and funded by American studios, productions are made with an English speaking audience in mind. Dubbings into other languages are always an afterthought. In many international movies, the story is set exclusively in the USA, the characters speak English as a first language, and there are no language issues to deal with. For movies where the plot necessitates scenes set in countries where English is not the first language, and characters whose first language is not English, directors have to make choices. Choices must be made as to how these facts are made clear to the audience whilst retaining the authenticity of the setting. This paper describes the language choices made in the movie *Slumdog Millionaire*, in order to make it comprehensible to an international audience.

### **1.1 Background of the setting**

India is one of the world’s linguistically diverse nations where multilingualism is a common phenomenon. Hindi is the official language and the English language has become a language which elite Indians often use to communicate with each other, especially across linguistic groups and a lingua franca for educated Indians. They often employ code-switching strategies in their discourse by inserting words, phrases or sentences from different languages (English in India, 2009). In India, English is either used as code-switches or as a stand-alone language. In fact, the ever so popular Bollywood movies often have dialogues that have a mixed variety of Hindi and English. Apart from the use of music and dance, the use of English alongside Hindi reflects the language situation in Mumbai.

## 1.2 Hindi-English Code-switching (HECS)

According to Annamalai (2001) Indian multilingualism is huge as there are 162 mother tongues. This multilingual character of India is seen in Mumbai; the industrial capital of India, where people from all over India come to seek employment. Puspaa Pai (2005) said that in Mumbai, every child is exposed to at least four languages starting from infancy. This could be a factor causing Hindi-English code-switching (henceforth HECS). Annamalai (2001) noted that HECS is part of the speech repertoire of Hindi-English bilinguals, who switch codes in different speech contexts for a variety of linguistic or socio-pragmatic reasons, for example to fill a lexical or even a pragmatic gap in the matrix language, or to signal social distance or proximity in interactions. In India, where English is a prestige language, code-mixed varieties drawing upon English as the embedded language signal a degree of prestige "... the mixed language can be said to have prestige, since the amount of mixing corresponds with the level of education and is an indicator of membership in the elite group." (Annamalai, 2001: 203). It is therefore not surprising that code-switching occurs in the movie, *Slumdog Millionaire*.

## 1.3 English and universal comprehensibility

"It is plain that now no one can claim sole ownership of English." (Crystal, 1998: 30). English is an international language and has become the language of everyone (Jenkins, 2004). The use of English in *Slumdog Millionaire* ensures comprehensibility for an international audience. This movie reflects a divergence from movies of the immediate post-colonial period in India, when there were strong feelings of antagonism against the British Raj and the colonial language was not used. For instance in the all-time favourite movie *Sangam*, which by today's Bollywood standards would have seen characters who are also English-educated, only Hindi was used. Today, the fact that the English language is associated with economic strength, technological advancement, and prestige, often makes Bollywood want their Indian characters to speak both languages in their movies.

Today's Bollywood cinema largely cashes in on a younger generation of Indians who do not relate to the post-colonial emotions of being anti-British. The use of English albeit in an Indian setting with Indian actors has allowed the movie *Slumdog Millionaire* to expand its audience from merely the Indian sub-continent to an international market.

After watching the movie, the non-Indian audience is subconsciously reminded that English has "acquired unparallel functional and societal depth" (Kachru, 1994: 3) as it has its own distinctive role in India's multilingual society. Boyle (2006), the director of *Slumdog Millionaire*, has obviously realized the value of using English in 'Slumdog Millionaire'. Such use caters to an international audience and there is a pragmatic need to have a means of communicating with such an audience. In fact, the language used in the movie reflects the multilingualism of India but it must be emphasized that the variety of English used although understandable by an international audience is still essentially Indian and belongs to India. Indian English has become an entrenched variety. Crystal (1998: 137) argues that "even if new Englishes did become increasingly different, as years went by, the consequences for World English would not necessarily be fatal."

The movie has succeeded in showcasing its ability to reflect the needs of linguistic pragmatism. Boyle, (2006) explains that he has faced the challenges head-on through his aspirations to make the movie appealing to an international audience. He explains that his team had to take charge of the language used by the actors and work out standards of English/Hindi appropriate and acceptable for both the Indian and international audience. By saying that the use of English in the movie is for international comprehensibility means that the English used though spoken by Indians is of a standard that makes it understood by both native and non-native speakers of English and so the message can get across effectively to an international audience. To achieve this standard various communicative strategies such as code-switching and translation are used to retain an Indian identity for the characters and yet simultaneously be able to communicate with an international audience.

#### **1.4 Communicative strategies**

A number of communicative strategies are used in *Slumdog Millionaire* to enable it to connect with an international audience. The concept of communicative strategies is not foreign in sociolinguistics. Bialystok (1983:103) defines communicative strategies as ‘all attempts to manipulate a limited linguistic system in order to promote communication.’ David (2006) is of the opinion that they serve to compensate for the inadequacies of speakers and listeners in the target language which is being used. Thao Le (2005) says that communicative strategies are often used in daily interaction, For this paper, code-switching, as a communicative strategy will be focused on as it is the most common strategy used in the movie *Slumdog Millionaire*. Code-switching is defined by Gumperz (1982: 59) ‘as the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passage of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems’. Code-switching refers to instances when speakers move between languages and dialects in the course of a conversation. It occurs for different reasons.

#### **1.3 Synopsis of the movie**

Jamal Malik (Dev Patel), an 18 year old orphan from the slums of Mumbai, is about to experience the biggest day of his life when he is merely a question away from winning a staggering twenty million rupees on India’s version of “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?” However, when the show breaks for the night, police arrest him of suspicion of cheating because they are of the view that a slum boy could not have the knowledge to answer all the questions asked. Desperate, Jamal tells the police about his life in the slums and explains that the answers are based on his experiences. He describes adventures on the road, vicious encounters with local gangs, and Latika, the girl he loves and has lost. Every chapter of his story reveals the key answer to the game show’s question. Recounting his life history to the police, Jamal is close to winning twenty million rupees. He proves his innocence and continues with the game. He confidently answers the final question but to keep the audience on suspense shots of a series of past incidents between his brother Salim and Latika are shown.

## **1.4 Why *Slumdog Millionaire*?**

*Slumdog Millionaire* is selected for analysis because it is highly popular and has been watched by millions of people around the world. *Slumdog Millionaire* is a 2008 British film directed by Danny Boyle, written by Simon Beaufoy and co-directed in India by Loveleen Tandan. *Slumdog*'s focus on the slums and the exploitation of the underdog is harsh. It was nominated for ten Academy Awards in 2009 and won eight, the most for any film of 2008. These awards included Best Picture, Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Film Editing, Best Sound Mixing, Best Cinematography, Best Original Score and Best Original Song. It also won five Critics' Choice Awards, four Golden Globes, and seven BAFTA Awards, including Best Film. *Slumdog Millionaire* has stirred controversy concerning language use and its portrayals of Indians and Hinduism.

Simon Beaufoy's script was originally entirely in English, but the film director Boyle's decision to have the children speak Hindi instead is the right call. Having the children speak in their native language makes perfect sense, especially because this depicts the realism of the lives the children lead.

## **2. Methodology**

The study examines the occurrence of code-switching in the movie "Slumdog Millionaire." The movie was viewed four times to familiarize ourselves with the interactions where code switching from English to Hindi occurred. Selected interactions with code switches were transcribed and analyzed. The analysis focuses on the reasons for the code switches which occurred.

## **3. Discussion**

It is to the much larger audience's advantage that the movie is using both Hindi and English. The main objective of using English in this case is to enable the audience to understand the movie while at the same time maintaining the cultural setting of the story through the use of Hindi. Code-switching occurs frequently within a domain or social setting in the movie. Translation and subtitles are also used to enable non-Hindi speaking audience to understand the plot.

In the movie, code-switching can be seen to be used in at least two ways. Firstly, it is used to communicate to the audience the different phases of what is going on in the movie. In parts of the movie where the flashbacks occur and the audience is shown the lives of the children in the slums, the language used is Hindi. However, as the movie progresses to show the children as adults in a better world as compared to the slums of their childhood, more of the prestige language, English is used. The predominance of the English language is also to cater to the non-Hindi speaking audience who would have had to read subtitles in the earlier part of the movie. This switch from Hindi to English over time also implies the changes that have taken place in the lives of the characters. English could be used to show that the characters now have better lives as using English is associated with better education and quality of life, given the economic opportunities that

come with the ability to use the language. A further illustration of this is when the brothers discover that they can earn a living by becoming English-speaking tour guides for foreign tourists visiting the *Taj Mahal*. Code-switching happens due to an economic factor, i.e. to make money as guides to foreign tourists. The switch to English, in so far as it is explained, hinges on the brothers Salim and Jamal's ability to extemporize the language in the city of multilingual Mumbai. So code-switching and translation in different parts of the movie helps to ensure that the audience is able to follow the plot.

Code-switching is also seen to take place within the characters' interactions in certain scenes. The policemen who interrogated Jamal, the contestant of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, used Hindi code-switches in dominant English. The conversation between the two police officers who interrogated and tortured Jamal shows instances of Hindi code-switches in dominant English to signal social distance between the speakers and the victim (see Example 1).

It is also interesting to note that these policemen also switched back to Hindi when cursing or using curse words. Hindi is used for curse words like *ben chod*.

#### Example 1

Policeman: The *motherchud* is overthere.  
Police Sergeant: He's unconscious, *chutiya*, (ass) what good is that?  
*Are wa, Siniwas*, "We'll have Amnesty International here,  
*ps*eeing in their pants about human rights."  
(To Jamal): Your name, *benchod*.

In the talk between Jamal and Prem Kumar, the host of the show, Hindi and English are used intermittently. Prem Kumar uses Hindi when he talks to Jamal privately before and during the show but switches to English when the rounds in front of a high audience begin. However, although the setting influences his language choice, Prem Kumar does not forget to establish rapport with the audience in both the languages by greeting them with "Good evening, *namasca, saska racha*". When introducing the game show he also uses both languages. He says "*Kaun Banega Crorepati*- Who Wants to Be a Millionaire". Using both languages to say the same thing suggests two roles for the different languages –one to suggest authenticity of the setting (Indian) and the other to cater to a non-Hindi speaking audience.

According to Bhatia and Ritchie (2004) participant roles and relationship play an important role in language use. Prem Kumar, sticks to the phrase *tea chaiwalla* which means 'a boy who serves tea' when referring to Jamal (see Example 2).

#### Example 2

Prem: And what does an assistant phone basher do exactly?  
Jamal: I get tea for people and...  
Prem: *Chaiwalla. A chaiwalla*. Well ladies and gentlemen, Jamal *Malik garmal ga ram chai chare walla* from Mumbai, let's play "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?"

He continuously repeated the phrase with the purpose of demeaning Jamal, a mere “server of teas” who he believes will never be able to win the game show.

Address forms are important to signal the attitudes and ties of a speaker to a listener. The different ways of addressing Jamal show the relationship between Jamal and the people around him. Most of the time, the characters in the movie address him as Jamal. Salim, his brother calls him Jamal and so does Latika, the woman he loves. The only time when he is referred to as ‘*bhai*’ or brother by Salim is when the later wants to make amends with him for the wrong he (Salim) did i.e. taking away his friend, Latika. In contrast Prem Kumar addresses him as ‘*chaiwalla*’ (server of tea) and the police officers use derogatory terms by calling him ‘*benchod*’ (sister fucker) and ‘*motherchud*’ (mother fucker). The superiority shown by Prem Kumar and the policemen is obvious by their forms of address used with Jamal who comes from one of the many slums in Mumbai.

Often we find the same utterance being repeated, first in Hindi then in English. This strategy is again used to satisfy the need for authenticity and the need for intelligibility and being understood by a non-Hindi speaking audience. For instance when Mister Nandha utters ‘*Ram nan satya hai, Babri Masjid dhvasthan hai*’, it is understood that both Jamal and Salim will know the meaning since Hindi is their mother tongue. However, to make it comprehensible to the audience, the movie director makes Mister Nandha clarify and translate it in English (see Example 4).

#### Example 4

Mister Nandha: *Ram nan satya hai, Babri Masjid dhvasthan hai.*

Jamal: Mister Nandha?

Mister Nandha: We have destroyed your mosque. Now the followers of Ram will drive you dogs out of the city.

Often people in power use English in the movie. For instance in the very first part of the movie two policemen on motorcycles who were chasing young Jamal and his friends who were playing on an airfield, shouted with authority, “ Private *ka*-land”. This code mixed utterance has the Hindi preposition *ka* between the two English lexical items private and land. It is also not surprising that the police officer who interrogates Jamal speaks mostly in English to his subordinate and to Jamal. Even gangsters or the members of the underworld are linguistically empowered. In one scene, Maman, the gangster speaks English to show that he has power over Salim, Jamal and Latika when he says (see Example 5):-

#### Example 5

Maman: Hello again... Jamal, Salim. Really thought that you could just walk in and take my prize away.

Before killing Maman, Salim in turn shows his power when he utters Maman’s words “Maman never forgets ... isn’t that right?”

To instigate and provoke Jamal the police officer uses English (see Example 6).

#### Example 6

Police Officer: Was she pretty?  
Jamal: ( No response)  
Police Officer: I guess not.  
Jamal: She's the most beautiful woman in the world

Later the police officer shows his power when he emphasizes the message that Jamal should accept the ten million rupees prize money and spend the money instead of going for more (see Example 7).

#### Example 7

Inspector: But you. You've got ten million rupees *ek dum* guaranteed, *yaar*? And who knows how much further? Fancy the twenty million, do you?

Code-switching at the single lexical item level occurs when English words are habitually used in dominant Hindi. Examples of such English words are 'helicopter, autograph, gunfighter, future'. Arvin speaks Hindi to Jamal but switches when referring to a currency note as 'dollar' and 'Benjamin Franklin'. The see-sawing between English to Hindi mimics the linguistic code-switching that Indians of a certain class use, and this depends not only on who they are speaking to but also what they are talking about or referring to. So it is not surprising if one might ask for a wine-list in English but use Hindi to order a plate of *bhelpuri*. In the childhood scene Salim and Maman, converse in Hindi but single English lexicals are inserted (see Example 8).

#### Example 8

Maman : *Jamal, ap time malgia he, professional mandega.* (It's time to go professional.)  
Salim: *Kia? Satchi?* (What? Really)

Hindi lexical items for curses are abundantly used in the dominant English dialogues. For example when Salim goes to see Javed, the chief gangster in Mumbai, one of Javed's men answered Salim (see Example 9).

#### Example 9

Salim: I'm looking for Javed.  
Javed's man: *Motherchud!* He is not looking for you.

For certain speech acts English is used, for instance when apologizing and showing appreciation. When the grown up Jamal expresses his sympathy to the blind Arvin, he uses English saying 'I'm sorry'. He says 'Thanks when he expresses his gratitude to Arvin for telling him where to find Latika.

English is more prestigious and has economic value compared to Hindi. This could serve as an explanation that Jamal and Salim picked up English, posing as tour guides at the *Taj Mahal*. In their adolescence, the brothers have to accommodate to foreign tourists and learn their language for survival. This also corresponds to the speech accommodation

theory (Giles, 1978) whereby the less powerful tend to converge to the speech styles or language choices of the more powerful interlocutors. The higher ranking police officer uses more English in his interrogation but his assistant uses more Hindi due to the latter's lack of proficiency.

The soundtrack at the end of the movie, a mixed lyric of English and Hindi, is an attractive strategy for promoting the movie. The mixed discourse is also to accommodate the non-Indian audience who want to understand the content of the lyrics.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Sridhar (1996: 53) believes that in a multilingual society, each language uniquely fulfils certain roles and represent distinct identities, and all of them complement one another to serve the complex communicative demands of a pluralistic society. *Slumdog Millionaire* shows that although Hindi and English are widely spoken in Mumbai, they are often used as code-switches, either more of one and less of the other or vice versa depending on interlocutors, topics and settings and speech acts.

In the movie, code-switching can be perceived as an achievement strategy in order to get meaning across to the audience. Even though the movie was made by non-Indian film makers, *Slumdog Millionaire* has managed to depict the real life situations of a society probably unfamiliar to the movie makers as well as the audience. The audience is able to understand the movie and the movie has obtained a high number of awards. One of the factors that has played an important role in audience comprehension (thus, enjoyment of the film) is the use of language. Although Hindi and English are both used, the overall effects as a result of code-switching as a communicative strategy employed to initiate and maintain comprehension appears to have been successful. The choice of code does have important consequences for depicting characters, settings, relationship between interlocutors, and specific speech acts. Code-switching can be perceived as an achievement strategy in order to get meaning across to a non-Hindi speaking population and at the same time to manifest authenticity.

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