

Linguistic resistance and power in Indian political public relations practice: A video-ethnographic study

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Abstract

India's multilingual landscape presents political public relations (PPR) practitioners with both strategic opportunities and communicative challenges. Campaigns often rely on Hindi and English, but regional languages such as Kannada and Tamil are also used to assert identity and push back against Hindi and English dominance. This article draws on 56 hours of video from ethnographic fieldwork and ten semi-structured interviews with social media teams at two South Indian political parties during the 2019 general election. Using Ethnographic Communication Analysis (ECA), it examines an everyday professional interaction through critical discourse analysis, conversation analysis, and gestural analysis. The findings show how multilingualism functions as a site of symbolic struggle, where practitioners negotiate belonging, exclusion and representational legitimacy. Humour, code-switching, and language-based microaggressions emerge as communicative tactics of solidarity and resistance. By foregrounding the Global South context and adopting a multimodal ethnographic approach, this study extends critical public relations scholarship by showing how multilingualism is used in the reproduction of power and inequality.

Keywords

multilingualism, political public relations, linguistic resistance, India, language and power

India's multilingual political landscape generates communicative terrains where ideological boundaries and cultural diversity are continually negotiated by political public

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relations practitioners. Through their messages, practitioners communicate with supporters while shaping perceptions of political opponents. These communications are situated within broader societal contests over organisational and linguistic power. On the one hand, practitioners are expected to produce messages that reinforce official narratives in dominant languages, on the other, they must navigate the hegemony of Hindi and English while relying on regional languages such as Kannada in their everyday work. This creates a site of struggle where linguistic dominance is not merely represented but lived, managed, and at times, resisted.

Linguistic anthropologists describe this condition as multilingual normativity, which is the expectation that communicative life unfolds through the routine and dynamic use of multiple languages rather than within a single dominant one (Nakassis and Annamalai, 2020). Within such conditions, language is never a neutral medium but a socially situated vehicle of power (Duranti, 2011). For political public relations practitioners, operating inside this multilingual normativity entails constant negotiation of linguistic authority and ideological alignment. Their everyday acts of translation, language choice and linguistic play thus become expressions of cultural negotiation and control through which political organisations reproduce, and contest, the moral and ideological order of contemporary Indian politics (Lee, 2023; Mundy and Bardhan, 2023; Yang et al., 2025). Political parties in this context, as argued by Husted (2024), operate as cultural organisations, sustained through communicative practices that discipline and align members. For practitioners, working within this multilingual normativity means continually mediating between organisational coherence and linguistic diversity.

Like other regions of the world, India's electoral landscape is marked by pronounced linguistic complexity (Duranti, 2011; Lee, 2023). Yet, despite operating within such multilingual contexts, public relations scholarship has largely treated language as a neutral or monolingual conduit for communication, leaving the linguistic dimensions of internal and campaign communication under-examined. As Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2012) observed, language has largely been treated as a taken-for-granted conduit rather than a site of strategic and ideological negotiation, particularly in non-western contexts. Consequently, little attention has been given to the everyday labour and lived experiences of those producing political public relations content (Edwards and Hodges, 2011; Yeomans, 2019). This article addresses that gap by examining how professional interactions can become sites of identity creation, solidarity, exclusion and conflict.

In this study, multilingualism is not merely a communicative system of political expression, but rather an area of ideological contestation, where regional identities are affirmed, dominant norms are resisted, and practitioners negotiate and experience diversity. Thus, by foregrounding language as a modality of power, this study contributes to critical public relations scholarship by answering the following research question:

RQ: How are dominant and regional languages used by practitioners to negotiate power in the everyday practice of political public relations in India? To address this question, the study presents empirical data, drawn from a larger video-ethnographic data set of everyday interactions within a regional campaign office of an Indian (national-level) political party, where practitioners collaborate on content production, translation and message framing. The excerpt examined illustrates how practitioners navigate Hindi,

English and Kannada in their routine communicative work, revealing the lived dynamics of multilingualism, hierarchy and resistance in Indian political public relations practice.

Political public relations in India: Power and practice

Critical public relations scholars [Berger \(2005\)](#) and [L'Etang \(2005\)](#) urged researchers to examine the everyday practices of practitioners so that the social consequences of public relations work could be better understood. Since then, critical scholarship has explored intersections of race, feminism ([Fitch, 2016](#)), voice, image and identity ([Daymon and Demetrious, 2013](#)). Two key debates have emerged from this body of work. The first concerns power, how public relations may reinforce or resist dominant structures ([Edwards and Hodges, 2011](#); [Valentini, 2021](#)). The second centres on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), particularly how public relations can more effectively represent and serve marginalised communities ([Edwards and Hodges, 2011](#); [Valentini, 2021](#)). While these studies critically examine the public relations function within broader organisations, they often treat the department itself, in [Bhargava's \(2024\)](#) words, as a “black box.” Such treatment reflects [Husted's \(2024\)](#) observations on research concerning political parties, which for him are organisations that are often viewed as strategic actors rather than cultural organisations. Overlooking the internal communicative practices of parties, in [Husted's \(2024\)](#) words, is a mistake, because it is within these spaces that advocacy, ideology and coherence are performed, negotiated and contested.

Given that public relations operate within entrenched power structures, scholars have urged the adoption of DEI frameworks to make professional practice more inclusive. Yet, as [Yang et al. \(2025\)](#) and [Mundy and Bardhan \(2023\)](#) noted, these frameworks have largely evolved within Western corporate settings and are now facing both political backlash and conceptual fatigue. In India and within the context of political parties, DEI takes a different form. Here, politics and power are seen intersecting with language, region and caste rather than race or gender alone ([Lee, 2023](#); [Rasquinha, 2024](#)). Particularly within the multilingual reality of Indian political life, where English and Hindi access power through their status as the official languages of courts, national governance, and mainstream media, regional languages occupy a lower position in the formal hierarchy yet retain deep cultural legitimacy. Within organisational contexts, especially in informal settings, it is through these regional languages that practitioners make sense of practice and negotiate belonging ([Bhattacharya, 1988](#); [Lee, 2023](#)). Political parties of South India exemplify this complexity. For example, the caste-based and linguistic orientations of regional parties in Tamil Nadu, the Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh and Vatal Nagaraj's Kannada Chaluvai Katt Sangha in Karnataka all mobilise linguistic and regional identities as the basis for belonging ([Rasquinha, 2024](#)). Yet, as [Husted \(2024\)](#) reminded us, the internal cultures and frameworks of inclusion within such parties remain underexplored. Examining their language practices allows DEI to be re-theorised, not as a corporate import, but as a lived struggle over voice, belonging and legitimacy in the multilingual Global South.

Despite the initial rhetorical enthusiasm surrounding DEI, its practical outcomes remain uneven, with recent political and institutional pushback exposing the fragility of its claims to inclusivity ([Mundy and Bardhan, 2023](#)). [Place and Cizek \(2021\)](#) highlighted

this disconnect, showing how inclusive rhetoric often fails to confront structural exclusions. Drawing on intersectional theory, they argue that DEI initiatives risk becoming symbolic performances of inclusion rather than efforts to redistribute voice, agency or power. Their critique is vital to this study, which asks whether public relations can genuinely foster inclusion and social change. While much scholarship assumes that public relations reproduce dominant power relations, [Place and Ciszek \(2021\)](#) invited us to consider how it might also disrupt them.

To assess these possibilities, research must attend to how power operates inside public relations departments, or in this context a political public relations department ([Bhargava, 2024](#); [Rasquinha, 2024](#); [Theunissen and Sissons, 2017](#)). This kind of investigation needs to examine who speaks, who is silenced, how decisions are made and how organisational priorities are negotiated in practice, under organisational constraints. Within this broader concern, what remains largely overlooked is how the expectation to work through dominant languages shapes practitioners' professional experiences, even when their daily interactions depend on regional languages.

By foregrounding these micro-level dynamics, this research moves away from the prevailing macro-level portrayals of public relations as organised persuasive communication ([Bakir et al., 2019](#)) or even organised lying ([Edwards, 2020](#)). Instead it focuses on how public relations is enacted in situated, everyday moments. While such macro-levels accounts are useful in explaining how public relations is structurally embedded in institutional efforts to shape discourse and legitimacy, they tell us little about how such power is experienced in linguistic and practice contexts. In these settings, inclusion hinges on whose language practices are legitimised as "professional," making linguistic diversity a core DEI dimension.

Multilingualism, identity and the politics of language hierarchies

Linguistic-anthropological scholars treat multilingualism as a normal condition of social life, in which language is never neutral ([Duranti, 2011](#); [Nakassis and Annamalai, 2020](#)). For this research, a practitioner's choice to communicate in a particular language can be seen as both a reflection of and a vehicle for political and institutional power. This means that, in multilingual workplaces (including political public relations offices in South India), language is not simply a conduit for meaning but a resource through which belonging, authority and legitimacy are enacted. As [Rasquinha \(2024\)](#) noticed, in India the struggle for linguistic inclusion is deeply tied to access, representation and recognition across linguistic and regional lines, this makes linguistic diversity a central dimension of DEI.

Within the Indian multilingual sphere, the dominance of Hindi and English privileges certain publics and practitioners while marginalising those whose professional or political expression occurs in regional languages such as Tamil, Kannada or Telugu. Thus, the "E" and "I" in DEI (equity and inclusion), manifest through the politics of language choice and visibility, where communicative legitimacy depends on navigating India's ethnolinguistic hierarchies. The country recognises 22 languages in the Eighth Schedule¹, while the Census records more than 120 named languages. For ethnolinguistic scholars such as

Irvine and Gal (2009) and LaDousa (2014), crucially, what counts as a “language” versus a “dialect” in itself can be a site of power.

Recognising language as a site of power then is not new. Historically in India, English has indexed metropolitan and elite publics (Bhattacharya, 1988), reproducing representational asymmetries (L’Etang, 2008), while regional languages index ethnolinguistic identity and local legitimacy. Comparative work shows similar task/identity splits elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia, where dominant languages are mobilised for institutional functions and regional languages for community anchoring (Angouri, 2014; Ashraf, 2023). In such hierarchies, for scholars Bhattacharya (1988) and Mackey (1988), linguistic dominance is reproduced through state policy, institutional uptake and associations with “modernity” or “professionalism”.

Multilingualism in this study is understood as a lived practice, that includes the everyday selection, mixing and translation of languages that enact symbolic power in workplace interaction (Fairclough, 2001). Fairclough (2001: 124) described the “order of discourse” as the social structuring of language practices, where certain ways of speaking gain dominance through the hidden workings of power. Within this order, accents and regional dialects that deviate from dominant norms of English are marked as “non-standard” and treated as inferior (May 2023; Tankosić and Dovchin, 2023: 728, 730, 733). Tankosić and Dovchin (2023) characterised this as linguistic racism: a form of symbolic violence in which professional legitimacy hinges on fluency in dominant codes. Barker (1981: 21, 29) situated this within a broader development he termed “new racism”, where cultural markers such as accent and pronunciation serve as proxies for exclusion. While new racism captures the larger paradigm shift from biological to cultural forms of discrimination, linguistic racism sharpens the focus on how language itself is weaponised in institutional and professional contexts.

The implications for public relations are concrete. Practitioners are expected to be the voice of external publics within organisational decision-making (Fawkes, 2015), yet in multilingual societies this role is constrained when practitioners lack access to regional languages or when those languages are de-legitimised in professional settings (Rasquinha, 2024). As a result, language hierarchies can narrow who is heard, align practice with elite audiences, and undermine claims of inclusion. At the same time, practitioners may tactically translate, or switch languages to resist control or build solidarity (Bhargava, 2024; Holmes, 2000; Theunissen and Sissons, 2017), though such tactics can also exclude or be misread as incompetence depending on listeners’ ideological stances (Holmes and Stubbe, 2015). In short, language in political PR is both expressive and regulatory. Multilingualism here refers not only to the coexistence of languages but also to the patterned, power-laden ways professionals use them within specific institutional settings.

Unveiling power dynamics: Critical discourse studies

This study builds on Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) (Wodak and Meyer, 2015), but departs from its traditional textual focus (Weaver, 2021) to develop a more situated and embodied theoretical framework. Here, CDS foregrounds how power is enacted through culturally specific, multimodal professional practices. For Fairclough (2001), meaning-making is not confined to language alone but extends to images, gestures and embodied

expression, always tied to context. In multilingual campaign settings, these processes unfold across both dominant and regional languages.

The study positions CDS within a culture-centric framework, applying theories of power to the everyday micro-interactions of practitioners (Sissons, 2015). Discourse is treated as one dimension of a broader communicative environment, where power is enacted through embodied and interactional practices such as, intonation, silence, gesture and gaze, that carry culturally specific meanings (Goffman, 1964; Holmes, 2000; Kendon, 1967). Therefore, rather than isolating discourse as textual output, this theoretical framework conceptualises power as enacted through multimodal professional interactions used to maintain, negotiate and/or resist control. This framework provides a culturally grounded theoretical lens from which professional communication practices used to navigate professional political public relations practices in India can be examined.

Methodology

This article draws from a larger video-ethnographic study of political public relations practice in South India, which involved immersive observation (Gold, 1958) within the communication department of a political party that has a nationwide presence, focusing particularly on a regional political public relations office during the 2019 Indian General Election. In total, 56 hours of video-recorded interactions were collected and 10 semi-structured interviews (Minichiello et al., 2008) conducted, a combination commonly paired with video ethnography (Pugh and Mosseri, 2023). The interviews, undertaken with content strategists, social-media coordinators, and senior communication managers, were designed to contextualise practitioners' everyday routines and perceptions of language hierarchy.

For this article, one critical interaction from the broader 56-hour dataset is presented, to address the research question, with interview material used specifically to explain and enrich the interpretation of this focal episode. Interview excerpts are used selectively to contextualise the observations and practices analysed. Thereby, this case shows how multilingual practices unfold across dominant and regional languages in the everyday work of political public relations practitioners.

The interaction analysed was selected from among several relevant episodes because it offered an unusually dense concentration of the linguistic tensions that recurred across the broader dataset. While several episodes involved multilingual negotiation, this incident provided the clearest real-time confrontation between institutional expectations to produce content in English/Hindi and practitioners' affective orientation toward Kannada. It also featured the richest multimodal evidence, making it analytically suited to this study. Importantly, the forms of resistance displayed in this episode (refusal, humour, coded emotion) appeared repeatedly in the wider corpus, although often in more attenuated forms. This incident was therefore selected as the most complete, visible and analytically tractable instance of a recurring practice pattern.

The study generated a rich multimodal dataset. The video recordings captured daily planning meetings, content production activities, informal interactions, and political messaging. In addition to audiovisual (multimodal) material, field notes and reflexive

journaling, as used by Bhargava (2024), Sissons (2014) and Rasquinha (2024), were maintained to document contextual observations. Together, these materials provide a layered account of everyday communicative practice.

To identify relevant episodes, also referred to as critical incidents (Flanagan, 1954) or routine behaviour (Koç and Hatice, 2023), the study adopted the principles of Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954). Critical incidents (cases/episodes) were selected based on three criteria: (1) the entire event was fully captured on video; (2) it demonstrated a significant aspect of professional practice; and (3) the observed practice recurred consistently across the dataset. All identified critical incidents were transcribed using a conversation analysis transcription protocol for verbal interaction (Jefferson, 2004), supplemented with multimodal annotations for gesture, gaze, spatial positioning and prosodic features (Sissons, 2014). Analytically, the study relies on Ethnographic Communication Analysis (ECA), an approach that combines conversation analysis, critical discourse studies and multimodal interaction analysis (Sissons, 2014). Once the analysis was completed, participant feedback sessions were held to discuss and corroborate the interpretations. Consistent with member-checking practices (Rasquinha, 2024: 73), selected video excerpts and analyses were revisited with participants to strengthen the credibility of the findings.

The first author maintained a non-intrusive presence in the field by observing without interrupting ongoing work, negotiated access through established professional networks in political communication and ensured transparency by clearly outlining the purpose of the study and obtaining informed consent from all participants. Pseudonyms are used in all transcripts to protect identities, although contextual recognition remains a possibility. The research received ethical approval from the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

To capture the nuanced communicative practices of participants in this multilingual public relations setting, the data are presented in a table format (with three layers), the original Kannada script, a phonetic English transliteration, and a contextual translation. The Kannada script is retained to reflect the linguistic texture of interaction, including features such as word stress and elongation, which are often lost or flattened in translation. In addition, this format allows readers familiar with Kannada to appreciate how intonation, register and performativity contribute to meaning-making in these professional exchanges.

Furthermore, data are presented with accompanying visual stills from the video data to illustrate multimodal interaction (e.g., Figure 1, Image 1.1), alongside transcribed speech data, with identifiable features such as faces, corporate branding and office layouts deliberately obscured. While not fully anonymised, these images adhere to the ethics protocols approved for this study, balancing the need to protect organisational and participant confidentiality with the methodological imperative of demonstrating how spatial and embodied cues structure the interaction. Visual data is thus presented as sketched or blurred overlays, ensuring sensitive identifiers are suppressed while preserving analytic visibility into gesture, spatial positioning, and gaze, which are key elements in interpreting and analysing the interactional dynamics of multilingual workplace communication.

Pearl	Kannada Script	ಏನಿವರವಿರಬೇಕೆಂದು ಭಾವಿಸಿ ಕೇಳಬೇಕೆಂದು ಬೇಡವೆಂದು	
	English Script	(CM) xxx: bha:se >kalsi:kodla< bed,ava:	
	Translation	should I translate xxx 's speech or not	
Pearl	Kannada Script	ಛು ವಿವರವಿರಬೇಕೆಂದು ಭಾವಿಸಿ ನಡೆಸು ಮಾತಾಡತಾರಾ ನಾನು ಮಾಡಲು	
	English Script	thru: (CM)xxx englise nalli matadtare (.)> I nanu madala<	
	Translation	damn xxx is speaking in English I am not doing this	
Adam		ah:	
Pearl	Kannada Script	ವಿವರವಿರಬೇಕೆಂದು ಭಾವಿಸಿ ನಡೆಸು ಮಾತಾಡತಾರಾ ನು ಇವರು ಬರೆಯುವ	
	English Script	(CM) xxx engl is nalli matadtare na:an lli: bari:ya.la:	
	Translation	(CM) xxx is talking in English I will not write	
Adam	Kannada Script	ಅರ್ಥವೇನು ಮಾಡಬೇಕು	
	English Script	arth:ag bekala: modi ge	
	Translations	modi should understand	
Adam	Kannada Script	ಅವರು ಕೇಳುವುದು ಮಾತಾಡಬೇಕು ಅರ್ಥ ಅವರಿಗೆ	

Figure 1. Enacting group solidarity, resistance and power in practice.

Background to the interaction

As seen in Ashraf’s (2023) and LaDousa and Davis (2022) observations on Southeast Asia, the South Indian practitioners similarly positioned Kannada as an identity resource while reserving Hindi and English for campaign functions. This pattern is clearly visible in the interaction examined here, where participants’ linguistic identities were tied to Kannada, a regional language of South India. However, English and Hindi were also frequently used in their professional settings to meet institutional and campaign demands (LaDousa and Davis, 2022). All practitioners shared a South Indian identity and spoke Kannada, but their multilingual repertoires varied. While, everyone spoke in English,




	English Script	ava:ru, >kannad< alimatha:didre arth,agilla:	
	Translation	he won't understand if he speaks in Kannada	Image 1.1
Pearl	Kannada Script	ಹಂದಿ ಮತಾಡಿದರ್ ನಂ ಇಂಗ್ಲಿಷ್ ಹೇಳ್ತಾನೆ ಇಂಗ್ಲಿಷ್ ಮತಾಡಿದರ್ ನಂ ಕೈ ಯೆನ್ ಬಾರಿಯೇಕೆ ಆಗಲ	
	English Script	hindi mata:did, re: nan-- >ighte heltini< (.) english mata:didre: nan kai yen bari:yeke agala	Image 1.2
	Translation	if he speaks in Hindi I am telling you now if he speaks in English my hands can't write anything	Image 1.3
Adam	Kannada Script	ಮೋದ್ ಇಂಗ್ಲಿಷ್ ನಲ್ಮ ಮತಾಡತಾರ ಕೆಲಮಿದಗ್ಗೆ ಯೆಲ್ಮ ಬರ್ಲೆಲಿ ಆವರು ತಮಿಳ್ ನಾವು ಹೋಗಿದರ್ ಇಂಗ್ಲಿಷ್ ನಲ್ಮ ತಮಿಳ್ ನಾವು ದಲ್ಮ ವಪ್ಪತಾರ್ ಆಧ್ಕೆ ತಮಿಳ್ ನಾವು ದಲ್ಮ ವಪ್ಪತಾರ್ ಆಧ್ಕೆ ಇಂಗ್ಲಿಷ್ ನಲ್ಮ ಮತಾಡಿದರ್ ಹಂದಿ ಮತಾಡಲೆಕ್ ಇಲ್ಮ	

Figure I. Continued.

Hindi, and Tamil, their fluency differed, one was comfortable in English but not Tamil, while others were the reverse. Even in Kannada, there were contrasts, most spoke a Bangalore dialect, while some evidently used northern and coastal dialects.

Since independence, non-Hindi speakers (for example, Kannada and Tamil speakers) have accused political administrations of imposing Hindi upon them (Lee, 2023). In contemporary times, these accusations have been directed particularly at the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India’s ruling right-wing Hindu nationalist party (Ranjan, 2021). Hindi, spoken mainly in North India (often called the Hindi Heartland), is associated with an Aryan identity², while Tamil and Kannada are linked to a Dravidian, or South Indian, identity, whose communities are considered among the subcontinent’s earliest inhabitants (Hardgrave, 2022). This linguistic-racial distinction has fuelled long-standing demands for language-based regional divisions, first emerging during colonial rule and intensifying in post-independence India (Lee, 2023). For the practitioners in this study, and more broadly for South Indian communicators, representing a language also meant representing a political and cultural identity.



	English Script	Xxx >english nalli mata dtara< kal:burgi,nalli (0,3) >ellilli< ava,ru: tamil nadu †hogi,dre: eng,li:sh nalli, mata:dtare: (0.1) tamil nadu dalli (.) vadi,tare adhijike (.) english mata:dtare hindi mata:dlike illa:	 Image 1.5
	Translation	Will xxx speak in English in Kalburgi, only if he goes to Tamil-Nadu he will speak in English in Tamil Nadu they will beat him if he speaks in Hindi	
Adam	Kannada Script	ಎಲ್ಲೆಡೆ ಕಲ್ಲು ಬಿದ್ದಾರೆ	 Image 1.6
	English Script	elleru (0.3) kallu bidtare	
	Translation	everywhere they will stone him	
Adam	Kannada Script	ಇಲ್ಲಿ ಹಿಂದಿ ಕಲ್ಬುರ್ಗಿ ಉತ್ತರ ಕರ್ನಾಟಕ ಬೆಲ್ಟ್ ಎಲ್ಲರಿಗೂ ಹಿಂದಿ ಬಾರುತೆ	
	English Script	lli, hindi (.) ka:burgi utta:r >karnatak< beltu: (.) elli: ella,ri:gu: hindi bar,ute:	
	Translation	here Hindi Kalburgi is in the Uttara Karnataka belt everyone understands Hindi	

Figure I. Continued.

The interaction analysed here took place as practitioners (belonging to the national opposition party) in the regional communications office monitored a televised campaign rally held in Kalaburagi (Gulbarga), northern Karnataka, during the 2019 general election. The rally featured both the incumbent Prime Minister (PM), Narendra Modi, and the state’s former Chief Minister (CM), and was regarded within the office as a defining moment in the party’s southern campaign. The Prime Minister spoke in Hindi, and it was only after his address that the Chief Minister began speaking in English, a transition that practitioners immediately read as politically and linguistically significant. When the former CM spoke in English rather than Kannada, practitioners interpreted it as signalling allegiance to national and metropolitan publics rather than to local, Kannada-speaking audiences. This shift, for them, exemplified how language choice mediates visibility and belonging in India’s multilingual politics, English indexing institutional and elite reach, while Kannada embodies regional identity and affective proximity.

Adam	Kannada	ತಮಿಳು ನಾಡು ಒಂದೇಕಡೆ ಬರಬೇಕೆಂದರೆ	
	Script	ತಮಿಳುನಾಡು ಇನ್ನೇನುಕೂಡ ನಡಬಲ್ಲ	
	English	tamil nadu (.) ondu; kade: barakhond	
	Script	hogta.re; english na:lli:	
	Translation	Tamil Nadu is the only place where he reads out the speech in English	

Figure 1. Continued.

The linguistic politics of this setting are complex. Kannada is Karnataka’s official language, but Gulbarga (a bordering district)³ also has a sizeable Marathi-speaking population due to its proximity to Maharashtra. In South India more broadly, Hindi is often regarded as an imposition of northern state ideology (Lee, 2023), a perception that has driven ongoing political resistance and the growth of regional identity movements (Ranjan, 2021). The campaign’s social media team, Pearl, Joe and Adam, shared a South Indian identity and fluency in Kannada, but differed in dialects and language preferences. Their task was to curate real-time responses to the speeches and post strategically framed tweets under hashtags such as #GoBackModi⁴ and #ModiMosa⁵.

The interaction

The interaction analysed here took place inside the media office of a regional campaign hub where the practitioners were monitoring the rally speeches while preparing content for two simultaneous campaigns. The #GoBackModi initiative required material in English and Hindi, while #ModiMosa drew on idioms in Kannada. Although all three practitioners were literate in four languages (English, Hindi, Kannada, Tamil), the language they favoured was Kannada. This tension was revealed when Pearl, expecting the former CM to speak in Kannada, was taken aback as the former CM began to speak in English. As the above transcript and images show how, linguistic dominance is experienced in the day-to-day work of content production.

The transcript highlights how quickly unease was voiced. Only a few minutes into the CM’s speech, Pearl asked, “Should I translate (CM’s name) speech or not?” The delivery of this line was unusually quick, reflecting tension and the speaker’s anxiety that the response might compel her to translate the speech. Her utterance was not simply a logistical question, it was delivered with a rising intonation, paired with tight facial muscles and an averted gaze toward her phone screen (Image 1.0), which was open to the campaign’s Twitter (X) page. These nonverbal cues, including the absence of direct eye contact and tightly drawn brows, indicated anxiety, possibly about being required to translate tweets into Kannada.

Pearl received no response because Adam did not hear her, so she continued by first making a “spitting sound” and then saying, “(politician’s name) is speaking in English.

I'm not doing (writing) this." The abrupt rhythm and mimicked spitting sound, common in South India as a cultural expression of displeasure (Pear, 2010), conveyed her frustration with the situation. Pearl's expression was further marked by tight facial muscles and frowning eyebrows (Lunenburg, 2010; Mahmoud and Robinson, 2015), visually confirming her emotional state. The stress on the politician's name and the phrase "speaking in English" conveyed emotional withdrawal and linguistic discomfort (Keltner and Anderson, 2000). Together, these cues appear to form a coherent multimodal narrative of resistance.

The refusal, "I will not write," verbally confirmed this resistance. It was delivered softly, but with a faster tempo, suggesting resignation rather than confrontation, while anticipating disagreement. Pearl's protest was not aimed at Adam's authority but at the institutional expectation to produce content in English. Her resistance, grounded in expert rather than positional power, aligns with Caponetto's (2023) framing of agentive refusal in constrained professional settings.

Unlike her initial question, "should I translate (CM's name) speech or not", which received no response, Adam, did react to Pearl's declaration, "I'm not doing this" with an "aha," that signalled attentiveness indexing a change of state in his orientation to her speech. This minimal response also functioned as a turn taking cue allowing Pearl to reply and claim her next turn (Schegloff et al., 1977). She reiterated, "(politician's name) is talking in English, I will not write," emphasising the same words with marked stress. This stress on specific words by Pearl is known to be a linguistic attention-seeking strategy (Holmes and Stubbe, 2015). The emphasis on both the politician's name and the word "English" appear to be early indicators of her emotional discomfort (Koda and Mori, 2014). In the feedback session, Pearl confirmed this difficulty, explaining,

I do not like working on English campaigns because when the speech is in English, it is hard to find opposing points... Usually, if the speech is in English the target is the national media (English or Hindi) who prefer to focus on the personality rather than the work they have done.

When asked whether it was easier in Kannada, she responded,

Yes, in Kannada it is easier to come up with something to write. In English, I have to think too much about the wording. In Kannada, I don't think (about the words), it just comes.

These reflections suggest that what Pearl initially framed as a cognitive problem is also a linguistic one, grounded in the politics of language choice. Linguistic hierarchies privilege dominant codes, which in turn shape who can speak with ease and legitimacy in professional settings, a dynamic evident in Pearl's difficulty and consistent with critiques of language policy and linguistic racism.

As the interaction continued, Adam remarked, "(PM) should understand." This line, laced with sarcasm (Cheang and Pell, 2008), echoing Pearl's earlier awareness that the use of English was never neutral. Both practitioners recognised that English speeches were not directed at the immediate rally audience but at a national media public, and that this shift framed the message in terms of personality rather than issues. Adam's sarcastic comment thus reinforced the point that choosing English was a deliberate communicative strategy, one that sidelined local linguistic repertoires. Later (in the feedback session), Adam clarified,

It is not a general thing, some do it and some do not. Not all politicians are the same, they have their own ideas. But English is popular only in urban areas, and only a few urbanites participate in political rallies if they are held in the city. Political rallies held in the city are attended primarily by people from the rural areas bordering the city. Every minister at whatever level is in charge of bringing a set number of people (facilitated by the PPR practitioners). These people do not speak English, so if and when they use English it is not for the crowd. There will be an agenda, mostly it will be for the press people.

Adam further explained:

Most politicians in Karnataka when they speak to journalists rarely read a script. Last week he (the regional politician) was asked something and he gave the press some wrong information. He received a lot of back-lash from his party. Today, in front of the Prime Minister, he cannot make those mistakes.

Continuing the exchange, Adam stated, “he [the PM] won’t understand if he [the CM] speaks in Kannada.” This was both an explanation and a subtle verbal attack on the Prime Minister, casting him as an outsider to the southern cultural-linguistic context. The use of “he” to refer to the Prime Minister framed him as alien to the South Indian linguistic landscape.

Roughly 90 seconds later, Adam stood up and moved his chair next to Pearl. Mistaking this movement for him leaving the room, Pearl reacted at once: “If he speaks in Hindi, I am telling you now, if he speaks in English my hands can’t write anything.” Her response was immediate and her verbal assertion, “I am telling you now”, followed by a short pause, was forceful and underscored her resistance. In addition, the statement was accompanied by two notable hand gestures (see [Figure 1](#), image 1.3 and image 1.5), a clenched fist with an extended index finger pointing upward, signalling aggression or warning; and, an open palm with fingers spread, signifying a gesture of stoppage ([McNeill, 2005](#)). These gestures reinforced her refusal and marked her behaviour as assertive, even impolite, due to the emotional strain of being expected to write in English.

Adam responded, “Will (politician’s name) speak in English in Kalburgi?” Though posed as a question, the line was declarative, with no reply expected. Stress on the location (Kalburgi) highlighted its regional inappropriateness, while his open-handed gesture with fingers aligned towards the television signalling reference ([Goodwin, 2000](#)). Pearl’s relaxed expression (Image 1.6) suggested that Adam’s humour had successfully lightened the moment ([Holmes, 2000](#)). He continued: “Only if he goes to Tamil Nadu will he speak in English. In Tamil Nadu, they will beat him.” The raised pitch and faster tempo signalled heightened emotion ([Günthner, 2011](#)), and reference to Tamil Nadu deliberately evoked its strong linguistic identity. The phrase “beat him,” though metaphorical, conveyed assertiveness, and drew on cultural expressions of power, where humour is used to challenge authority.

In continuation, Adam extended his arm, palm facing down and moving side to side in a gesture interpreted as a “No” ([Kendon, 2004](#)) (Image 1.5). He then struck the desk three times while repeating “in Tamil Nadu,” highlighting the rhetorical weight of that location. The beat gesture, with its biphasic motion and rhythm, emphasised key discourse elements

(Chen and Adolphs, 2023), serving both cognitive and rhetorical functions by processing emotion and highlighting contrastive meaning.

Adam's gestures, especially the desk-beating, conveyed affective disapproval and indexed regional resistance to the imposition of Hindi. This act can be read as an instance of linguistically enacted symbolic violence (Kulkarni, 2014), a performative reaffirmation of southern linguistic identity against northern linguistic dominance. The exchange concluded with Pearl smiling, her more relaxed expression suggesting that Adam's humour had temporarily eased her discomfort. Yet in the subsequent feedback session, Pearl clarified that she eventually completed the tweets in English and Hindi, remarking simply: "That is the job, so you have to do it." Her words underline how organisational expectations constrained language choice, requiring practitioners to work in dominant codes even when these were experienced as uncomfortable or exclusionary.

Power and language in Indian political public relations settings

Grounded in linguistic anthropology's long-standing view that language is a constitutive medium of ideology and power (Duranti, 2011; Irvine and Gal, 2009), this study shows how those dynamics materialise in everyday political PR work in multilingual India. In a context where English/Hindi carry symbolic authority while regional languages anchor local legitimacy (Nakassis and Annamalai, 2020), multilingualism becomes an organisational mechanism through which professional identity, authority and inclusion are negotiated and gained. By tracing how practitioners navigate these linguistic hierarchies in everyday practice, the study connects critical public relations research to South Asian scholarship that treats multilingualism as the normative condition of social life and a key terrain of inclusion and exclusion.

Situated within the 2019 Indian general elections, where online campaigns on platforms such as Twitter (now X) routinely accompanied offline events like election rallies (Rasquinha, 2024), a complex and ideologically charged communicative landscape emerges. The research focused on a single interaction that took place within the communications office of a political party (Husted, 2024) where linguistic conflict was routine yet normalised, often going unrecognised or deemed unimportant by those involved.

The interaction analysed here points to a wider pattern of language control, whereby organisational expectations (goals or interests) dictated that campaign content be produced in dominant languages such as English and Hindi, even when regional languages like Kannada would have enabled effective communication. "Language control" in this context refers not to overt censorship but to the subtle disciplining of professional practice and alignment of practitioners' labour with institutional priorities and interests (goals). Pearl's eventual completion of the tweets in English and Hindi exemplifies this dynamic, an instance of resigned compliance, or suspended critical reasoning under professional compulsion, where organisational imperatives outweighed her own linguistic comfort and political stance.

As Pearl explained in her feedback session, speeches in English are usually "for the national media (English or Hindi) who prefer to focus on personality rather than the work done," limiting scope for critical counter-messaging. Adam similarly remarked, "...if and when they use English it is not for the crowd. There will be an agenda, mostly it will be for

the press people.” Together, these reflections illustrate how English-language communication operates as a form of symbolic power, strategically privileging elite publics (Weaver, 2021), while distancing practitioners from the communities they represent and weakening their capacity to act as mediators. Thus, language plays a key role in ensuring political public relations serves not only to inform but also to obscure, redirect or manipulate public understanding under the guise of professionalism in India.

The interaction also revealed how practitioners are compelled to produce content in dominant languages, which in turn becomes a mechanism through which political organisations maintain narrative control and further institutional interests, while regional languages simultaneously operate as resources for solidarity and subtle resistance. What emerges is not a static picture of power but a dynamic configuration in which control and resistance circulate simultaneously. Power in this context is seen as not only hierarchical but interactional. While official languages structure organisational authority, regional languages organise micro-group dynamics and can be weaponised to exclude or to assert belonging. These findings extend public relations and political public relations theory by showing how power is enacted and negotiated in multilingual professional environments through everyday communicative practice. Nevertheless, such enactments and resistances do not always succeed, they are fragile, contingent and continually reproduced through interaction.

This study contributes specifically to inclusion (within DEI), by demonstrating how linguistic struggles in political public relations practice are not isolated professional challenges but manifestations of broader societal inequalities. Much like gendered or racial exclusions, linguistic hierarchies are embedded within everyday organisational processes that reproduce power and inequality. In doing so, the study suggests that the pursuit of inclusion must extend beyond corporate frameworks to encompass the communicative practices of political organisations. Political parties, though rarely considered within DEI discourse, are unique sites of organisational communication. Their adoption of inclusive linguistic practices would not only strengthen internal representation but also legitimise DEI principles within the broader structures of governance and democratic participation. Therefore, inclusion in public relations cannot be measured solely by representational metrics but must also account for the everyday practices that limit practitioners’ voices.

Conclusion

So, how are dominant and regional languages used by practitioners to negotiate power in the everyday practice of political public relations in India? Dominant languages, such as Hindi and English are embedded in institutional structures, deciding whose voices are amplified and whose are silenced. They are therefore used by practitioners as mechanisms of power through which systems of dominance are reproduced, at the same time, professional legitimacy and ideological conformity are gained. This reduces the representational capacity of practitioners, especially those who are marginalised. In contrast, regional languages (Kannada, Tamil) function as resources of affective bonding and symbolic resistance. However, this resistance is situational and fragile, it does not undo

institutional power but briefly subverts it through everyday linguistic performances. Practitioners in this study used culturally rooted acts, such as mimicked spitting sounds, verbal refusals to write in English and humour, to express disapproval. Consequently, multilingualism operates not as a structured system that reinforces hierarchies within practice, but as a series of context-dependent communicative choices conditioned by power.

While this research does not seek to prescribe professional solutions, it identifies a constraint routinely overlooked in DEI scholarship and training, the ideological and institutional role of language, through which practitioners construct professional realities. In doing so, it contributes to DEI debates by showing how language-based exclusions (and inclusions) undermine representative communication, particularly in multilingual democracies. Greater recognition of linguistic hierarchies is essential, for these dynamics alienate practitioners from their communities and narrow the ideological and cultural scope of public relations practice.

Author Notes

This research was conducted while the first author was affiliated with Auckland University of Technology. The first author is currently affiliated with the University of Waikato, Department of Marketing, Management, and Law.

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Ethical considerations

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Consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained from all participants in accordance with AUTECH guidelines.

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Declaration of conflicting interests

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study (video ethnography and interview transcripts) are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions protecting participant confidentiality. Excerpts may be shared on request, subject to approval by the ethics committee.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. In the Indian Constitution, “Schedules” are annexes that specify supplementary details to constitutional articles. The Eighth Schedule lists the languages officially recognised by the Republic of India for use in parliamentary proceedings, government communication and other administrative purposes. It currently includes 22 languages.
2. In this context, “Aryan identity” refers to the cultural and linguistic dominance associated with North Indian Indo-Aryan languages such as Hindi and Sanskrit, historically tied to upper-caste and Brahminical authority. In contrast, “Dravidian identity” is linked to South Indian languages such as Tamil and Kannada, and has been mobilised through Dravidian political movements that resist Hindi imposition and assert regional autonomy (Hardgrave, 2022).
3. Kalaburagi district (formerly Gulbarga) is in northeastern Karnataka, bordered to the west by Bijapur and Solapur districts of Maharashtra, to the north by Bidar and Osmanabad (Maharashtra), to the east by Sangareddy and Vikarabad districts of Telangana, and to the south by Yadgir district in Karnataka.
4. #GoBackModi”: A social-media protest hashtag deployed in India, especially in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, to oppose Narendra Modi’s visits and policies toward the southern states.
5. #ModiMosa”: A Kannada-language hashtag that emerged in September 2016 as a critique of Narendra Modi and the state BJP’s handling of the Cauvery water dispute, the term literally meaning “Modi’s deception.

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