THINKING IN ENGLISH
अंग्रेज़ी में सोचना
ANGREZI MEIN SOCHNA

SPEAKING IN HINDI
हिंदी में बोलना
HINDI MEIN BOLNA

Translation, Creativity, and Value in Bollywood and Beyond

Tejaswini Ganti

Thinking in English, Speaking in Hindi



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TEJASWINI GANTI

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In memory of my mother, Subhadra Sashi Rao (1948–2012), who navigated the world effortlessly in multiple languages, thinking in at least three and speaking in five.

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Introduction

Language and Value in Media Production

In November 1996, while observing a film shoot in Mumbai, a television crew came to interview the film's star, Pooja Bhatt, about her upcoming release. After about seven questions, which Bhatt had answered completely in English, the interviewer pleaded, "*Pooja, thodi Hindi mein* answer *kiya kar. Yeh Hindi* program *ke liye hai*." [Pooja can you please answer a little in Hindi? This is for a Hindi program.] To which Bhatt responded, "*Hindi mein main zyaada bol nahi sakti hoon* [I can't say too much in Hindi], because I don't think in Hindi."

The interviewer assured her, "It can be in Hindustani."[1] Bhatt said, "I'll try, I'll try, I can't pretend." The interviewer then suggested, "When I'm asking you about your costars, for example, if I ask you about Naseer (Naseerudin Shah), you can start with '*Naseer ke saath* [with Naseer].'" After which Bhatt dutifully began her next two responses with "*Naseer ke saath*" and "*Shah Rukh Khan ke saath*," but each response had less and less Hindi in it. By the time the interviewer asked her about working with the actors Aamir Khan and Sanjay Dutt, Bhatt had completely lapsed back into English, and the interviewer did not remind her to switch into Hindi. Instead, the interviewer kept asking questions in Hindi, and Bhatt continued to answer them in English.

After eleven months of fieldwork focusing on the production culture of the Hindi film industry, now better known as Bollywood, I was no longer surprised to hear an actor claim that she was not comfortable speaking extemporaneously in Hindi or to code switch between English and Hindi when discussing films and filmmaking. I had gotten used to hearing many people around me, from actors to directors to writers asserting their inability to "think in Hindi" or the corollary, "I only think in English." This refrain occurred throughout my fieldwork in the late 1990s and early 2000s and captured the prevalence of English within the industry, especially among the actors, directors, writers, and others

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responsible for the creative decisions that went into a film. This was in stark contrast to the people who provided the physical labor for filmmaking, whose complex linguistic universe on film sets—Marathi, Bengali, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Gujarati, Punjabi—included Hindi as merely one language among many. In fact, during my research about the "Hindi" film industry, the only place Hindi was being spoken consistently was in front of the camera.

As I was finishing up book projects that focused on the transformations in the political economy, social world, and production practices of Bollywood (Ganti 2012, 2013), I noticed that the Hindi spoken in films had transformed considerably in terms of register and dialect from earlier eras of filmmaking. I was intrigued by this apparent contradiction: while the spoken language in contemporary Hindi cinema had become more diverse and regionally specific, English had become the de facto lingua franca of production within the film industry. With this puzzle in mind, I returned to Mumbai in 2013 to embark on a new research project that focused on language and language labor in the filmmaking process. I wanted to understand what it meant to create or "think" in one language (English) while executing that creative vision in another (Hindi), and the implications for a globally dominant media industry like Bollywood when a significant proportion of its members were not fluent in the language of its productions.

Thinking in English, Speaking in Hindi emphasizes the essential role played by language in the political economy of media industries, as it shapes "commodification, circulation and value formation" (Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012, 356) in media production. From the earmarking of subsidies for filmmaking in specific languages (Ganti 1998), the promotion of a particular dialect as a normative standard in advertising (Dávila 2001), and the daily translations undertaken by news agencies (Davier 2014) to Hollywood studios' local-language production strategies (Donoghue 2017), language is a category of sociopolitical identity, a form of labor, a set of commodified skills, and an object of market exchange (Chen 2022; Heller 2010; Irvine 1988; Urciuoli and LaDousa 2013). When we regard media as technical infrastructures that facilitate the flow of goods, ideas, people, narratives, and images (Larkin 2008, 2–6), we cannot overlook the role of language in shaping or even constituting that infrastructure.

In fact, if we adapt Brian Larkin's question in *Signal and Noise* and replace Nigeria with India to ask, "What would a theory of media look like if it began from India?" (2008, 253), I would contend that language has to be at the center. India is perhaps unique among film-producing nations for producing films in at least twenty languages every year and for having eight commercially vibrant film industries, all distinguished by language.[2] Filmmaking in India thus challenges and disrupts the national cinema paradigm—originating primarily from a European

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context—that presumes a one-to-one correspondence between nation-state, a "national" language, and cinema. Given the number of multilingual nation-states with film industries—Nigeria, Indonesia, and South Africa come immediately to mind—in the Global South, and the high level of cross-border collaboration and coproductions that occur across Europe (Betz 2009), an attention to language *in* cinema and media making can be generative of new themes and questions in the studies of production cultures and media industries.[3]

A heightened attention to language illuminates the material practices of media production, moving beyond textual analysis. By examining choices in scripting, dubbing, and linguistic adaptation, scholars gain new insights into production cultures—the daily collaborative work, specialized skills, and tacit knowledge that shape media creation in multilingual environments. This focus further reveals the extensive linguistic labor at every stage, showing how language choices are deeply interwoven with the workings of media industries. Such an approach highlights dynamics like labor arrangements, distribution patterns, and audience segmentation, revealing the role played by language in the political economies of media industries.

The history of filmmaking in India also disrupts the presumed association of language to region and place. In the early sound era, the British presidency cities of Bombay and Calcutta by virtue of the preexisting filmmaking infrastructure and access to capital and personnel, were producing films in languages that were not necessarily local to their respective regions. For example, the Bombay-based Imperial Film Company, which produced the first sound film in India, which was in Hindi, was also making films in Marathi, Tamil, and Telugu, and the East India Film Company in Calcutta was making films in Bengali, Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980, 111–13). After independence in 1947 and the subsequent linguistic reorganization of India during the 1950s and 1960s, Bombay/Mumbai became the only city in postindependence India where the main film industry associated with it did not produce films in the official state language.[4] In other words, the language of filmmaking and the language of the state, governance, and bureaucracy were not the same—in contrast with the Bengali film industry located in Calcutta/Kolkata, the Tamil industry in Madras/Chennai, the Telugu industry in Hyderabad, among others.[5]

Centered on the Hindi film industry and the allied dubbing industry located in Mumbai, this book is an investigation of translation practices, language ideologies, language politics, and regimes of value in the realm of mainstream media production. I illustrate the ways that linguistic ability is used to elaborate distinctions, create cultural capital, restrict access, and enact new hierarchies within production cultures. As an ethnography of translation practices, this book focuses on two distinct but interrelated sites of media production where

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the relationship between Hindi and English is constantly discussed, navigated, and negotiated: screenwriting in the Bombay film industry and the dubbing of Hollywood films into Hindi and Hindi streaming series into English.[6]

Examining these sites reveals the profoundly intertwined relationship between media making and translation, which leads me to make some key arguments that underpin this book. First, translation between English and Hindi is a central feature of the production culture of the Bombay film industry. Unlike other major centers of film production around the world, Mumbai is the only city where the language of the film industry's output (Hindi) does not correspond to the dominant languages of the region or with the official state language, Marathi. As a result of it emerging in the colonial port city of Bombay rather than in the Hindi "heartland" of northern India, the film industry drew personnel from all over the subcontinent and beyond. The "Hindi" film industry, therefore, since its emergence, has been a highly multilingual industry where fluency in Hindi has never been a prerequisite for acting, directing, or even screenwriting.[7] With Urdu-speaking writers, German-speaking directors, Bengali-speaking actors, Marathi-speaking singers, and Punjabi-speaking producers, every act and activity of filmmaking in Bombay/Mumbai was and continues to be an act of interlingual translation—frequently from English to Hindi but also from Bengali to Hindi, Telugu or Tamil to English to Hindi, or even Russian or Korean to English to Hindi.[8]

This critical role played by translation leads to my next assertion, which is that translation can materialize and bring into being "media worlds" (Ginsburg et al. 2002) such as the Bombay film industry. Media worlds refer to the dynamic social, cultural and political environments that are forged and sustained through media production and circulation. In India, translation has catalyzed both old and new media worlds, and the Bombay film industry has operated and continues to operate as a "translation zone" (Apter 2006; Cronin and Simon 2014). Expanding on Emily Apter's formulation of a translation zone as a site of "critical engagement that does not belong to a single discrete language" (2006, xiv), Michael Cronin and Sherry Simon define translation zones as those "areas of intense interaction across languages, spaces defined by an acute consciousness of cultural negotiations, host to polymorphous translation practices characteristic of multilingual milieus" (2014, 120). The Bombay film and dubbing industries are sites of intense interactions between many languages, with the most sustained being between Hindi and English. Translation was thus critical for establishing and forging a film industry in the highly cosmopolitan and multilingual Bombay in the 1930s and continues to be critical to maintaining Bollywood and the dubbing industry today.[9]

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It is important to establish at the outset what I mean by "translate/translation." As both a verb and a noun, a process and a product, *translation* is a very polysemic and capacious term.[10] By virtue of being both a folk and analytical category, *translation* also signals a vast array of practices and meanings that go beyond linguistic elements (Bassnet 2013; Bellos 2011; Bhabha 1994; Gal 2015; Zheng et al. 2023). Anthropologists have frequently treated translation as a "metaphor for the ethnographic enterprise" (Asad 1986; Clifford 1997; Gal 2015; Rubel and Rosman 2003), or as a reference to "a family of semiotic processes" (Gal 2015).

Perhaps the most common understanding—arising from its Latin etymology meaning to "bear across"—is the "transfer of meaning from one language to another" (Bellos 2011, 28), which is predicated on the need for finding or creating equivalence between two languages. The translation of audiovisual material, however, complicates ideas of translation as a simple linguistic transfer since films, television shows, and web series are "multi-semiotic" texts with multiple signifying codes—linguistic, musical, sound, photographic—interacting simultaneously to create meaning (Chaume 2004).[11] Translation studies, which has primarily been concerned with literary texts, has long moved away from concerns about fidelity and equivalence (Bassnet 2013) and regards translation as an "opportunity" (Shankar 2012) for creative and artistic expression; in other words as a type of transformation (Apter 2006; Bellos 2011; Bielsa 2021). Even when regarded as transformation, scholars of audiovisual translation studies (AVTS) point out the complexity of translation and draw our attention to the varied constraints (technical, temporal, cultural, visual, auditory) shaping the process; the diverse notions of fidelity; and the range of social, economic, technological, and political factors influencing translators (Chaume 2004, 2012; Cintas and Anderman 2008; Pérez-González 2014, 2019).

During my fieldwork, I encountered this multifaceted nature of translation, encompassing both transfer and transformation. Screenwriters and dubbing professionals discussed how conveying or transferring the meaning of certain ideas, humor, slang, profanity, or idiomatic expressions from one language into another was often challenging because of the perceived incommensurability between languages. For example, screenwriter Piyush Gupta, discussing the writing of Bollywood screenplays, declared during our interview, "I think Hindi and English are very different languages, so they have their points where they don't match. If you were to really translate a very funny dialogue in English, it becomes very difficult because English humor is very different."[12] While media makers acknowledged that the ostensible aim of translation was to transfer meaning, they admitted that they were also transforming media texts. Manoj Muntasir,

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a screenwriter and lyricist who wrote the Hindi dubbing script for the Marvel film *Black Panther* (dir. Ryan Coogler, 2018) discussed how even if the task was to communicate the "gist" of what was said in English, he was not bound by English's grammar or its figures of speech. He asserted,

> I'm not bound by even the similes that you're using. I don't want to use those similes. Those similes don't work for me. My similes are different because I'm an Indian and I'm writing for the Indian audience. They talk in a different manner. You watch *Black Panther* Hindi, you watch *Black Panther* English, there are a couple of places where we have gone totally away from the actual script. We should not be deviating away from the basic story line, the characters, the gist of it, but we can certainly take liberty when it comes to localizing it.[13]

This task of transformation, however, is constrained by the image onscreen. Mona Shetty, owner and dubbing director of Sound & Vision India, a leading dubbing studio in Mumbai, explained, "You can't ignore what you have on screen. You have to follow that. You're limited by the visual. You're limited by body language. You're limited by performance, by length, timing, and spoken meter."[14]

While the Bombay film industry's screenwriters emphasized the challenges of linguistic transfer, dubbing professionals highlighted the more transformative approach in their work. These professionals often expressed an ambivalence toward the very term *translation*, frequently disavowing it to describe their efforts at adapting English-language content. For example, during our interview, Muntasir prefaced his response by asserting, "I never translate!" and then explained, "I don't call it translating; it's like recreating in a totally different language." Screenwriter Mayur Puri, who wrote the dubbing script for Disney's live action *The Jungle Book* (dir. Jon Favreau, 2016), referred to it as his "first movie as a translator" and then immediately followed by stating, "I don't say translator. We call it transcreation."[15] For dubbing professionals, the term *translation* often failed to capture the extensive creative labor involved in their process, leading them to prefer terms like *transcreate*, which they felt more accurately reflected their efforts.

Transcreation is both a local term used by dubbing professionals in India and advertising and marketing professionals more broadly (Fang and Song 2014; Pedersen 2014; Rachabattuni and Rao 2025; Shankar 2015) and an analytical one used by scholars discussing literary and audiovisual translation (Chaudhuri 2006; Gambier and Munday 2014; Gopinathan 2006; Katan 2014; Katan and Spinzi 2014; Pedersen 2014; Zanotti 2014). Within the world of Indian literary theory,

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the term was originally coined in the 1970s to refer to English translations of ancient Sanskrit texts (Gopinathan 2006, 236) but then expanded to include the translation of these texts into modern Indian languages (Mukherjee 1981). Gopinathan's definition of *transcreation*—based on an analysis of theories of translation within Indian languages—as "an aesthetic re-interpretation of the original work suited to a new target-language audience" (2006, 237) is an apt characterization of how dubbing professionals described their practice. Therefore, my third assertion is that the concept of transcreation serves as a suitable framework for understanding the full spectrum of translation processes I encountered, from the linguistic transfer articulated by screenwriters when translating English dialogue into Hindi for a Bollywood script to the explicit creative transformations embraced by dubbing professionals. In the chapters that follow, I detail how media makers navigate and reflect on the challenges of transfer and transformation in their efforts to create work that circulates widely and appeals broadly.

While my research engages with the translation of spoken language, film studies has more commonly treated translation as a trope to describe the process of converting a textual artifact (script) into an audiovisual one (Nornes 2007, 33) and used *language* to refer to issues of form, aesthetics, or visual style, rather than the style or substance of a film's dialogue (Dwyer 2017; Kozloff 2000; Nornes 2007; O'Sullivan 2011). Film scholar Abé Mark Nornes, however, reminds us that not only was translation key for cinema becoming one of the first globalized art forms, but it has also been integral for the development of film theory and scholarship, "especially in its national cinema subfields" (2007, 3). In fact, in the United States it is possible to study and analyze a cinematic culture without knowing the language of the film and rely on subtitles—what Nornes terms the "linguistic monoglotism of film studies" (2007, 67–78).[16] Although Michel Chion characterizes cinema as a "verbocentric phenomenon" in which the voice is the medium of verbal expression (2019, 5), Euro-American film studies, with a few exceptions, has not focused on spoken language in cinema because of the discipline's dominant and longstanding characterization of film being a "visual medium" (Dwyer 2017; Jaeckle 2013; Kozloff 2000; O'Sullivan 2011; Salazkina 2016).[17] Even with the "sound turn" in film studies starting in the 1970s, film dialogue tended to be overlooked as a serious object of study, until more recently (Chion 2019; Jaeckle 2013; Kozloff 2000). By focusing on the scripting process, my book illustrates that film is not solely a medium of images but fundamentally one of words—whether they are written in a screenplay or uttered on sets and studios. Cinema is thus profoundly mediated by language.

Film dialogue, therefore, cannot be ignored when it comes to filmmaking in India, since the advent of sound in 1931 was a significant catalyst for local

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production and the emergence of linguistically differentiated cinemas (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980; Hughes 2010). Within the study and analysis of the varied popular and mainstream cinematic traditions in India, language is the primary mode of classification and delineates a scholarly focus. While the appellations "Indian cinema" or "Indian film industry" are commonly used across scholarly, pedagogical, and media discourses, they are odd and inaccurate terms for there is no singular *Indian* cinema or *Indian* film industry but several Indian *cinemas* or Indian *film industries*.[18]

Rather than treating language and translation as tropes or metaphors within filmmaking, my emphasis in this book is on translation as a *process*, specifically having to do with the production of onscreen verbal communication. A film's dialogue is not only essential to structuring its mise-en-scène and conveying information about a film's narrative and its characters (Chion 2019, 149; Kozloff 2000, 33), but it also shapes and guides viewers' experiences of watching a film.[19] In the case of cinema in India, the speech or dialogue uttered in a film "takes on a life of its own as an independent entity" (Dissanayake 2008, 400).[20] Film dialogue can be encountered in advertising, daily parlance, political speeches, journalism, radio broadcasts, television shows, sports commentary, social media posts, and other forms of popular culture in India. One of the most famous and oft cited examples of the significance of film dialogue is related to the 1975 Hindi film *Sholay* (Embers), in which the lines had become so popular that Polydor—the music company that had bought the rights for the film's music—released a separate record of fifty-eight minutes of select dialogue from the film about a month after the film's release.[21] The significance of dialogue was summed up by screenwriter Ghazal Dhaliwal during our interview: "Dialogues are such an integral part of the film, that you remember the film from the dialogues they speak."[22] Dhaliwal's statement points to how dialogue functions both as a mnemonic device recalling a film's essence and as a calling card representing a film's unique identity, highlighting the "vococentric" nature of cinema where the voice is privileged over other sounds (Chion 2019, 5).

The production of dialogue in Indian cinemas is the result of multiple collaborations in the filmmaking process. Within the Bombay film industry, these collaborations also involve translation and transcreation. As a result of the multilingual composition of the industry, a unique division of writing labor developed in the 1930s after the advent of sound whereby the script was broken down into three components: story, screenplay, and dialogue, with each element attributed to a different individual and each potentially being composed in a different language. Debashree Mukherjee, who excavates a fascinating history of screenwriting in 1930s Bombay, details how the studios of that era hired "language

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specialists or translators" who would translate the scripts, which could be in Gujarati, Bengali, or Marathi, written by Bombay's writer-directors into the required register of Hindi-Urdu (2015, 2020). This is a practice that continues into the present. Most contemporary screenwriters or writer-directors write the first drafts of their scripts in English and either render them into Hindi themselves or collaborate with a dialogue writer to adapt the script into Hindi.[23] The case of dialogue creation in the Bombay film industry, therefore, compels a broadening of translation studies to encompass collaborative, industrially driven, and culturally specific linguistic adaptations, moving beyond the traditional individual translator model. It also points to the significance of translation in the very preliminary stages of the creative process of film production.

However, unlike postcolonial translation studies, which typically focuses on literary translation and the movement of non-English texts into English, my focus is on audiovisual translation and the movement of media texts primarily from English into Hindi. This leads to my fourth assertion: In contrast to the dominant discourse within postcolonial studies about the inherent power imbalances between languages (e.g., Apter 2001; Asad 1986; Bassnet 2013; Dingwaney 1996; Niranjana 1992), I argue that Hindi and English work in tandem and therefore exist in a symbiotic manner within Mumbai's film and dubbing industries. As it refers to the close interaction and mutually beneficial relationship between two different entities living in close physical proximity, *symbiotic* is an apt term to characterize the coexistence of Hindi and English within these media industries. For example, a Bollywood screenplay written in English is not functional until the dialogues are added in (or translated into) Hindi. Additionally, Hollywood films have to be translated into Hindi and require Bollywood's production, distribution, and exhibition infrastructure in order to garner larger audiences and earn profits in India. Characterizing the relationship between Hindi and English as symbiotic, however, does not preclude questions of power and hierarchy, and I detail the ambivalence, tensions, and conflicts that accompany the process of interlingual translation.

Although conventional understandings and discussions of translation often posit it as a realm of loss, deficiency, or inadequacy, what the American poet John Ciardi termed the "art of failure" (1961), our contemporary world obviously could not function without translation. Translation is what enables the circulation of ideas, images, narratives, goods, people, and capital. Importantly, films and other audiovisual media are commodities that derive value—economic, aesthetic, social, cultural—from their ability to circulate (Appadurai 1986; Myers 2001), and interlingual translation is integral for such movement. Translation, thus, has been central to the global flows of mass media forms, as it serves as the "material

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precondition for the global circulation of meaning" (Bielsa 2005, 135).[24] After all, most of the entertainment media in the world—from Hollywood films to Bollywood films, from Brazilian telenovelas to Turkish soap operas, from Japanese anime to Korean dramas—is consumed in a translated form through dubbing or subtitling.[25] Translation is thereby fundamental to the very processes identified as globalization (Bielsa 2005; Cronin 2005; Ďurovičová 2009), as what defines something as "global" is not its homogeneity but its ability to be adapted "to infinite numbers of different cultural and social contexts" (Orengo 2005, 169). This idea of global content being locally reconstituted through fragmentary encounters and unexpected transformations, leading to new cultural formations, resonates with Tom Boellstorff's concept of "dubbing culture" (2003). However, while Boellstorff examines how individuals "dub" sexual subjectivities through mass media encounters, my book investigates the active production and industrial labor of "transcreation" in contemporary media industries. It is precisely through these material practices of transcreation that media content is adapted for diverse audiences in order to circulate across borders, thereby becoming global commodities that generate economic, aesthetic, social, and cultural value. Translation, therefore, helps to produce the category of the "global-popular," a conjugation coined by media scholars Bishnupriya Ghosh and Bhaskar Sarkar (2022) to indicate how the global circulation of media forms, even when initiated by formal media industries, is shaped and modified through local experiences and taste cultures. Hence, the material instantiation of the "global" when it comes to translating screen media is the foregrounding rather than the erasure of local difference (Mamula 2020; Orengo 2005).

Let me provide two brief examples to illustrate this point. During fieldwork in Mumbai in 2018, I managed to reach out to Vinay Kumar, a graphic designer living in Haryana who created the "Hollywood in Hindi" Facebook page in 2013, which had 168,000 followers as of 2025 (figure I.1). Kumar related that he only started watching Hollywood films in 2001, when he saw the Hindi dub of *Jurassic Park III*. Kumar discovered other people in his town who also were big fans of Hollywood films and once Hindi dubs were more easily available, they began to regularly meet to watch and discuss them. While he understood English, Kumar preferred to watch films in Hindi and responded to general criticisms about dubbed films as inauthentic by asserting, "Watching a movie in the language you understand the most is not an insult; it means we actually enjoyed it."[26] Kumar's statement reveals how dubbing provides access to global media and viewing pleasure. This point about access and pleasure was reiterated in my conversation with Sanket Mhatre, a voice artist who has had extensive experience dubbing for Hollywood films.[27] Using Marvel's blockbuster *Avengers:*

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FIGURE 1.1. Hollywood in Hindi Facebook page, December 2025. Screenshot.

Endgame (2019) as an example, Mhatre discussed how dubbing allowed viewers to enjoy and consume global youth culture by reducing linguistic barriers. Mentioning how "infinity stone"—a really important object in the film series—was translated as "*anant-mani*," Mhatre explained,

> Viewers, who either can't keep up with the language [English] or not be able to read the subtitles fast enough or not able to read them at all, want to be a part of this discussion about *anant-mani* and why they were important and so they have to watch these dubbed films. Infinity—*anant*—is an important concept in Hindi: It's always been around and it will always be around. So that person, when he's watched that film in Hindi and he's stepped out, he's confident that he can now discuss it. Which he would not have been able to do sitting next to a friend, watching it in English and asking, "What is happening?" I've gone through that phase! I know people who have gone through that.[28]

Mhatre concluded by asserting that the quality of dubbing had improved so much that viewers would be engrossed in the film and afterward would be discussing its content rather than problems with lip sync.

In this book, I offer ethnographic portraits of how globally popular media is actually produced in a particular location by focusing on how Hollywood films are adapted for and made accessible to the Indian market by dubbing professionals in Mumbai. What I discovered in my fieldwork was how heavily reliant this process was on popular Hindi cinema. In addition to drawing on Bollywood's vast storehouse of films, songs, stars, notable dialogues, and iconic characters, dubbing professionals also translate the speech in Hollywood films into the style

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and register of Hindi developed by the Bombay film industry. This register of Hindi fashioned specifically for the cinema with the advent of sound enabled the films from the Bombay industry to circulate widely across India and helped to create their transregional mode of address—a linguistic strategy that was not restricted to or associated with one particular region, what Harish Trivedi refers to as a "pan-Indian polyvocality" (2006a, 78).[29] The desire and economic necessity to reach broad audiences shaped the linguistic choices made by the Bombay film industry during the transition to sound and continues to govern media makers' choices today. This attention to audiences is a central feature of translation; in fact, the very basis for it.

I elaborate the "audience imaginaries," by which I mean the discursive constructions of the vast filmgoing public rather than empirical audiences (Ganti 2012), that influence how media makers navigate between English and Hindi while creating and crafting dialogue for films and shows that they hope can attract and beguile audiences. Based on my fieldwork with screenwriters and dubbing professionals, which also included my own participation in translating media texts, I argue that their diverse practices of screen translation are organized around four main principles: intelligibility, affinity, authenticity, and fidelity. These principles can often be at odds with one another, and I demonstrate how filmmakers and dubbing professionals negotiate these tensions and operate as cultural mediators (Asadova 2024). While the principle of intelligibility—that language and dialogue be easily understood—is common to both the film and dubbing industries, the weight of the other principles depends on the translation context. In the Bombay film industry, I detail how screenwriters balance the principle of intelligibility with that of authenticity, which prioritizes the use of registers and dialects associated with diverse classes and regions.

Dubbing professionals, on the other hand, must contend with the principles of affinity and fidelity in addition to intelligibility and authenticity. The principle of affinity is centrally concerned with practices, frequently the incorporation of local cultural references, that will render a foreign audiovisual text as more familiar and thereby more pleasurable (from the point of view of dubbers) to audiences. Affinity, however, is in tension with the principle of fidelity, which values being faithful to the source text in terms of content and synchrony, as well as the source voice in terms of timbre, pitch, and prosody. The success of these media makers thus hinges on their ability to expertly balance these competing principles. Each chapter of the book describes this complex and dynamic process and how media makers attempt to calibrate these principles, while also navigating the Indian state's censorship codes, to create content that can circulate widely and hopefully earn profit and prestige.

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Profit and prestige are the two primary regimes of value operating in Mumbai's media worlds. These regimes are the evaluative frameworks and standards that shape the circulation, contextualization, interpretation, judgment, and "consecration" (Bourdieu 1993) of commodities (Appadurai 1986; Frow 2013; Myers 2001). In the case of cinema, dialogue is an important—but of course not the only—feature of how films are received, reviewed, and judged. The four principles I have outlined correspond to these regimes: intelligibility and affinity are mainly associated with profit, while authenticity and fidelity are linked to prestige. However, these regimes are not mutually exclusive, and films and other audiovisual media are not confined to either one. Instead, translation plays a key role in how value is created for a media text and shapes how it becomes situated within one regime of value or the other. While translation has been characterized as a movement across semiotic systems (Gal 2015), I argue that it also involves movement across different regimes of value. This movement, however, is not unidirectional, nor does it follow expected or conventional language hierarchies. While in some instances a Hollywood film dubbed into Hindi shifts from being a high-status foreign import to a low-status local product, in others, the Hindi dub of a Hollywood film accrues greater economic, cultural, and social value. Conversely, it is not necessary that a Hindi language production dubbed into English becomes more prestigious; in fact, it can be an object of disdain. Therefore, my final assertion is that translation is always enmeshed in projects of value.

Such judgments about value and determinations of whether or not language is "easy" to understand (intelligibility), sounds "realistic" (authenticity), is "entertaining" (affinity), or remains "true" (fidelity) to an original reveal how translation is also centrally about language ideology.[30] Language ideology is a "cluster concept" (Kroskrity 2000, 8) that broadly refers to the "beliefs and attitudes that shape speakers' relationships to their own and others' languages, mediating between the social practice of language and the socioeconomic and political structures within which it occurs" (Cavanaugh 2020, 52). I detail how translation is a language-ideological project where discussions of linguistic difference, intelligibility, and skill are deeply entangled with assertions of social difference (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994). Screenwriting and dubbing, by being instances of translation and hence sites of metalinguistic discourse, are particularly productive arenas to examine beliefs about language, which emerge from particular social positions, and how such beliefs are articulated as justifications for its structure and usage (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994, 57–58). While linguistic anthropologists have pointed out that institutions such as the law, the state, and schools rely on the "ideologization of language use" (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994, 56) whereby language is linked to issues of social inequality, group identity, morality, and

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knowledge production, I illustrate how media industries and media production are also key sites to examine the imbrication of linguistic and social difference.

Let me recap my main arguments before I elaborate further on the historical, social, and scholarly context of this project. I argue that translation is a constitutive and material force in media production—more accurately characterized as transcreation. By ethnographically examining screenwriting and dubbing practices in Mumbai, I illustrate the interdependence of English and Hindi, establishing their symbiotic relationship within these industries. This approach demonstrates that translation operates beyond notions of linguistic purity or inherent hierarchy and instead actively creates commensurability between languages even where it initially appears absent. I explain how translation as transcreation is shaped by media makers' navigation of the competing principles of intelligibility, affinity, authenticity, and fidelity, and draw attention to how these principles—and the judgments they entail—are deeply informed by language ideologies about Hindi and English. Instead of regarding it as an imperfect transfer of meaning, I contend that translation is a dynamic, multimodal, and industrially mediated process of creating aesthetic, economic, and social value.

The remainder of this introduction provides further context for my arguments and engages with the scholarship that has informed this book. First, I present a snapshot of the history and theorizing of translation in South Asia and detail how translation has been central to the formation of modern India. Next, I describe the long-standing entanglement of Hindi and English in cultural production in the subcontinent since the late nineteenth century to support my argument about their symbiotic relationship in contemporary media making. The third section explains my choice to use "Hindi" rather than terms like "Hindustani" or "Urdu" and narrates the complicated history that produced these monikers. Subsequently, I discuss "Hinglish," examining what it signified and indexed in my fieldwork. This is followed by a section situating media making in Mumbai within the larger political context of the growing dominance and political consolidation of Hindu nationalism in India since 2014. Finally, I detail my methodology and chapter plan.

India as a Locus of Translation

Scholars theorizing about translation from the vantage point of South Asia start from a context of tremendous linguistic diversity and call into question some of the presumptions of Euro-American translation studies. They point out that embedded within translation studies—a field that emerged within Anglo-American scholarship and heavily theorized by English speakers (Bassnet 2013,

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345; Tymoczko 2006, 16)—is a monolingual norm (Trivedi 2006b; Tymoczko 2006) and a binary created between "source" and "target" languages with presumptions of a vast cultural distance between them.[31] For example, one of the ways that Emily Apter characterizes translation is that it "is a way of denaturalizing citizens, taking them out of the comfort zone of national space, daily ritual, and pre-given domestic arrangements" (2006, xiv). Such a conception of translation does not account for multilingual nation-states like India, nor can it make sense of a media industry's daily practices of translation, which are geared toward creating commodities that attempt to attract, entice, and entertain audiences.

Scholars who focus on South Asia characterize translation in terms of a comfort with linguistic multiplicity and claim that translation has been a defining feature of the subcontinent. Asserting that "South Asia as a whole is a region constituted through translation" (Kothari and Shah 2019, 127), Rita Kothari and Krupa Shah explain that translation "was more about inhabiting simultaneous linguistic spaces rather than stepping over from one linguistic area to another" (128) and that in ancient India linguistic boundaries were negotiated "without a cognitive and heightened idea of 'difference'" (130).[32] Discussing the various Indian words for translation, which posited much more varied relationships between an "original text" and a translated one than simple ideas of fidelity and difference, Kothari and Shah argue that Indian conceptions of translation were predicated on ideas of internal change and interaction that did not posit a "movement away" from a text but rather "a change within itself" (2019, 129). This understanding of translation as an internal transformation or reinterpretation resonates strongly with the concept of transcreation, which, as noted earlier, emerged in Indian literary theory to describe the aesthetic reinterpretation of Sanskrit texts for new audiences.

Translation in the conventional sense as interlingual transfer with concerns about fidelity and difference became institutionalized with British rule in India through all their various translation and classification projects (Cohn 1996; Kothari 2018b; Kothari and Shah 2019; Lelyveld 1993; Mitchell 2005; Trivedi 2006b; Washbrook 1991). According to Bernard S. Cohn, between 1770 and 1785, the British "successfully began the program of appropriating Indian languages to serve as a crucial component in their construction of the system of rule" (1996, 20). During this period, the British began producing grammars, dictionaries, and translations about and from the various languages in India, which set the stage for the eventual transformation of the languages that Indians would speak and read (23). David Lelyveld explains that these earlier grammars and dictionaries enabled the British to replace Persian with "vernacular" languages at the lower levels of their administration and facilitate the translation of official

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terminology from these vernaculars into English—"the language of ultimate ruling authority" (1993, 197). Examining nineteenth-century debates over pedagogy, lexicographical knowledge, and written language in India, Lisa Mitchell argues that a new way of thinking about language emerged wherein "languages were no longer viewed primarily as registers, with their uses specific to particular tasks and contexts," but instead as bounded and parallel mediums corresponding to "linguistically defined communities" (2005, 448).

Scholars have discussed the impact of G. A. Grierson's *Linguistic Survey of India* (*LSI*) (1928), an eighteen-volume survey that took over thirty years to compile, which enumerated, categorized, and disciplined the multitude of languages across significant swaths of India (Kothari 2018a; Kothari and Shah 2019; Lelyveld 1993; Sarangi 2009). Grierson's project has been described as "Herderian in spirit, which looked for an isomorphic relationship between languages and cultures" (Sarangi 2009, 216), where "each language was a contained entity with a demarcated geographic identity as determined from administrative headquarters" (Lelyveld 1993, 198). A central method of compiling the *LSI* involved translation—the first stage being to translate the English Bible into several Indian languages—to organize and categorize languages into philological families and differentiate "languages" from "dialects" (Kothari 2018a, 118). These colonial practices represented a significant "epistemological shift" not only in how language was understood but also how translation was conceptualized. Kothari and Shah describe how Indian writers in the early twentieth century internalized a vocabulary of translation that included notions of "source" and "target language," "faithfulness," and "authenticity" (2019, 140). The result was that a term such as *anuvaad*, which in premodern texts meant "to say after" or repetition (Trivedi 2006b), became the equivalent of "translation as transference" (Kothari and Shah 2019, 140). In contemporary Hindi parlance, *anuvaad* is the most commonly used term to refer to literary translation.

After independence from British rule, the Indian state inherited and further expanded the apparatus of translation. Starting from the Indian Constitution, which was written in English and then translated into Hindi (Austin 1966), translation became a critical element of governance and nation building (Kothari 2018b; Kothari and Shah 2019; Lelyveld 2009; Nair 2002; Ramakrishna 1997; Saxena 2022). The Official Languages Act of 1963 mandated that all forms of juridico-legal documents—contracts, permits, licenses—and manuals and regulations published by state agencies be translated from English into Hindi or other Indian languages (Ramakrishna 1997). Numerous organizations and institutions such as the National Translation Mission, the National Book Trust, the Sahitya Akademi, and the Commission for Scientific and Technical

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Terminology were established to facilitate the translation of educational materials, textbooks, literature, and techno-scientific vocabulary either from English into various Indian languages or between Indian languages.

In addition to this vast publication apparatus, Kothari and Shah remind us how translation is central to the functioning of the Indian state: "In a country with hundreds of languages and twenty-seven officially recognized regional languages, the Indian Parliament . . . witnesses everyday miracles of translation and simultaneous interpretation" (2019, 142), as all of the speeches, addresses, and communication in the chamber are translated into Hindi and English and transmitted to parliamentarians via headphones. This example of the complex linguistic context of India's parliament illustrates Rukmini Bhaya Nair's assertion that "'India' itself is a concept that *presupposes* the act of translation" and that the way a "common 'idea of India' makes itself available" to distinct ethnolinguistic groupings is "only through translation" (2002, 7). This pervasive history of translation, central to India's linguistic landscape, extends beyond governance, education, and bureaucracy into the realm of cultural production, which will be addressed in the next section.

The Relationship Between English and Hindi in Media Making

Since 2012, a number of Hindi films have featured storylines and plots where characters who do not speak English or who speak it haltingly or with a very strong "vernacular" accent are shown to be either socially disadvantaged—*Hindi Medium* (dir. Saket Chaudhary, 2017), *Half Girlfriend* (dir. Mohit Suri, 2017), *Dunki* (dir. Raju Hirani, 2023), *12th Fail* (dir. Vidhu Vinod Chopra, 2023)—or the butts of jokes and objects of ridicule as in *English-Vinglish* (dir. Gauri Shinde, 2012) and *Rocky aur Rani kii Prem Kahaani* (dir. Karan Johar, 2023). These presumed hierarchies between English and Hindi mirror the current polarized political climate in India, where each language is characterized as occupying distinct and, by implication, mutually antagonistic social spheres: English is identified with a culturally deracinated, secular elite and Hindi with a culturally authentic but sidelined Hindu majority (Bhardwaj 2020a, 2020b; Khan 2021; Rajagopal 2001; Sadana 2012b; Singh 2014; Yadav 2020).

I interrogate and complicate such assertions in this book. I do not present a conventional story of English ascendance and dominance, which is on the path to wiping out a "local" language. In fact, I contend that an elaborated, regionally specific Hindi in contemporary Bombay cinema becomes possible *because* of the increased importance of English within the film industry. I illustrate how

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the increased significance of English indexes a series of structural changes in the industry that make it feasible to produce films that rely on and celebrate diverse registers of Hindi. Unlike the stark difference and cultural isolation between the Hindi language and English language print media outlined by Arvind Rajagopal (2001), I argue that within the Bombay film and dubbing industries, Hindi and English are in a complementary and symbiotic relationship. As the chapters that follow will demonstrate, English serves as the language of production and business, while Hindi operates as the language of consumption, affect, and pleasure from the point of view of media makers. For example, screenwriter Manoj Muntasir likened translating a Hollywood film into Hindi to adding milk and sugar to black coffee. He said, "That English film is a black coffee, so when you add some Hindi, Hindi does what? Hindi adds sugar to it, and Hindi adds *yahaan ki bhains ka doodh* [the buffalo milk from here]."[33] This analogy vividly captures the symbiotic relationship between the two languages, where English provides the foundational "black coffee" of the global product, and Hindi imbues it with the local flavor, warmth, and cultural specificity necessary for mass consumption. Such a characterization reflects the dominant language ideologies about the distinction between the two languages, where English is associated with objectivity and neutrality and Hindi with cultural intimacy (Haham 2016; LaDousa 2014; LaDousa et al. 2022; Rajagopal 2001; Siddiqui 2020).[34] Although media producers articulated a clear distinction between these languages, my research consistently demonstrated how both English and Hindi are essential for the daily functioning of the film and dubbing industries in Mumbai.

In fact, English as a source language has been an integral part of media and cultural production more generally in India since the nineteenth century. For example, Shakespeare's plays were adapted and translated into various Indian languages from the mid-nineteenth century (Chaudhuri 2006; Das 2005; Panja and Moitra Saraf 2016; Trivedi and Bartholomeusz 2005). During the establishment of All India Radio (AIR), the broadcast scripts were initially written in English and then translated into different Indian languages (Lelyveld 2009). Similarly, silent cinema intertitles for Indian films were first written in English and then translated into Hindi, Bengali, and other vernaculars (Mehra [1931] 1993, 72–73). Within advertising, copywriters working in the "language" departments of ad agencies would translate the English copy to produce advertisements in Indian languages. Rashmi Sadana, in her examination of the cultural politics of Indian literary production in English, points out that "the worlds of English and Hindi constantly overlap" when it comes to the print and electronic media in contemporary India (2012a, 2). Akshya Saxena reinterprets the presence and evolution of English in India as a "people's vernacular" that lives on in

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other Indian languages and media, focusing specifically on the relationship of "mutual reliance" between English and Hindi in spaces such as literature, bureaucratic documents, and language legislation (2022, 6–19). Chaise LaDousa, in his study of the relationship between Hindi-medium and English-medium schooling in Varanasi, describes Hindi and English as "intertwined" and "mutually constructive" in discussions about schooling (2014, 20). Lisa Mitchell discusses the "silent role" played by English in the creation of modern Telugu, where all the initial discussions were carried out in English and the arguments being made for a modern Telugu would "not make sense without reference to English" (2005, 464). These varied examples point to how English operates as a "mediator between other Indian languages" (Sadana 2012a, 6) and a "translational vernacular" in India (Saxena 2022, 21). In this book, I demonstrate how English serves as a critical language of production within the film and dubbing industries in Mumbai.

All these examples point to the need to complicate our understanding of the cultural politics of English in India and move beyond conceptions of English as a "language of colonization" (Sadana 2012a) that is "hegemonic and violent, insufficient and oppressive, elite and exclusive" (Saxena 2022, 6).[35] Instead, this book offers a decolonial perspective on English in India, demonstrating how its presence facilitates, rather than suppresses, the vibrancy of local languages and cultural production. This approach builds on scholarship such as Braj B. Kachru's seminal "World Englishes" paradigm (Bhatt 2001). Kachru argued that English, far from remaining a colonial imposition, underwent processes of localization and adaptation in diverse postcolonial settings, leading to the emergence of distinct, legitimate "Englishes" that served varied sociolinguistic functions (1982, 1983, 1986a, 1986b, 1986c, 1988). By illustrating how English in the Bombay film industry is intertwined with, rather than antithetical to, the flourishing of Hindi, this book shows English as deeply embedded in local linguistic ecologies and cultural practices.

At the same time that English has become more prominent within Bollywood, the number of Hollywood films dubbed into Hindi has increased dramatically. All the major animated, action, superhero, thriller, and horror films are now released in India in dubbed Hindi, Telugu, and Tamil versions. Since 2012, Hindi-dubbed Hollywood films have been steadily making a mark at the domestic box office and earning profits for their Indian distributors. Furthermore, the entry of Netflix and Amazon Prime into the Indian media landscape in 2016 has raised the profile of dubbing significantly and expanded the practice considerably, since both Netflix and Amazon originals produced in India in Hindi are now dubbed into English for a global market. Thus, audiovisual

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translation practices such as the dubbing of Hollywood films and Netflix series into Hindi are helping to produce new media worlds that are reshaping public and popular culture in twenty-first-century India. The dubbing/localization industry is another zone of intense interaction between English and Hindi with a heightened level of self-consciousness about the negotiations and choices that characterize translation.

At first glance, it may seem like an unusual choice to bring together an analysis of the dubbing of Hollywood and screenwriting in Bollywood within the same book. Dubbing is a very explicit translation zone, while screenwriting can be seen as a more implicit one. However, I noticed many similarities between these two media worlds during my fieldwork. For example, in both spaces—whether it was a Hindi film being produced by the Bombay film industry or a Hollywood film being dubbed into Hindi—the first draft of a script was in English. As they started translating the English dialogue into Hindi, screenwriters and dubbing professionals both carefully evaluated the choices they made with respect to vocabulary and linguistic registers, and they aspired to craft speech that sounded "natural" and "colloquial"—in other words, not appear as crafted. The frustrations around translation—what sounded good or made sense in one language (usually English) did not in the other (usually Hindi)—and the language ideologies expressed about Hindi and English were also quite similar across both worlds. That Hindi was "heavier" and more long-winded than English was an example of a language ideology that I encountered in both spaces.

Additionally, the origins of the dubbing of Hollywood films into Hindi illustrate how the Bombay film industry was critical for the genesis of the dubbing/localization industry in Mumbai. While Hollywood films had been sporadically dubbed into languages such as Hindi or Tamil in the 1940s and 1950s (Govil 2008; Rajadhyaksha and Willeman 1999), the 1990s marked the beginning of a consistent presence of dubbed Hollywood films in India, with the unparalleled commercial success of the Hindi dub of *Jurassic Park* (dir. Steven Spielberg) in 1994. Ashim Samanta, the son of the successful producer-director Shakti Samanta and the head of the Aradhana Dubbing Studio, where *Jurassic Park* was dubbed, spoke at length in an interview during the online version of the India Voice Fest held in December 2020 about how he ended up in the dubbing industry. He mentioned that he had begun the dubbing studio in 1986 as a way to diversify the family's filmmaking business, since the 1980s were a particularly rough time for the Bombay film industry with home video and video piracy taking away large sections of the theatrical audience. When Universal Pictures decided to dub *Jurassic Park* into Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu, they approached Samanta because he had "one of the best dubbing studios" in India, and since he

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and his father were also involved in feature film production, Universal felt "we would be able to do justice" to the project (Samanta 2020).

Not only do Hollywood majors rely on local companies in India to carry out the translation and dubbing of their films, but increasingly for their Hindi versions, they are eager to utilize Bollywood stars for the dubbing and employ established screenwriters from the Bombay film industry to write the dub scripts. Furthermore, the same distributors and exhibitors who distribute mainstream Hindi films also distribute and exhibit Hindi-dubbed Hollywood films. In fact, since dubbed films are part of the same distribution and exhibition apparatus as mainstream Hindi films, the release schedule of dubbed Hollywood films is now calibrated with the release schedule of Bollywood films and vice versa. When taking the dubbing industry into account, the boundaries between Hollywood and Bollywood appear blurred and porous (Ganti 2021a). An ethnographic approach to translation that includes both screenwriting and dubbing and focuses on the *process* of translation, rather than the finished product, distinguishes this work from the scholarship on language in Hindi cinema and on dubbing and audiovisual translation.[36]

Is It Hindi, Urdu, or Hindustani? The Complexity of Nomenclature

While I have been using the term "Hindi" throughout this chapter, I am aware of the complex history that has produced the language that we come to understand as modern standard Hindi (Dalmia 1997; Hakala 2016; King 1994; Mody 2018; Orsini 2002, 2009). I want to draw readers' attention back to the opening anecdote of this introduction, where the interviewer first requests Pooja Bhatt to speak in "Hindi" and then suggests that she could speak in "Hindustani," once Bhatt confesses that she cannot think in Hindi. This interaction suggests that there is a distinction between "Hindi" and "Hindustani." Before I explain "Hindustani," it is necessary to insert "Urdu" into this linguistic mix. The language now called Urdu dates to at least the fourteenth century, but under other names including "Hindi," and in a slightly different form. Until the beginning of the eighteenth century, the word "Hindi" was used to refer to any native Indian language, because the term "Hindi" was an Arabic word that simply meant "belonging to *al-Hind*," the Arabic name for the Indian subcontinent (Everaert 2009, 243). By the end of the eighteenth century, "Urdu" and "Hindi" start to be used partly synonymously, and both terms were used to indicate the "new" native language that had come into existence as the common language at the Mughal courts (244). Pointing to the impossibility of tracing separate histories and roots

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for Hindi and Urdu, Christine Everaert asserts, "Through the course of time, the language that is nowadays commonly called 'Hindi' has been called *Hind(a)vī*, *Hindūī*, *Dehlavī*, *Kharī Bolī*, High Hindi, *Hindustānī* and even Urdu. Confusingly, one could just as well state that the language that is nowadays commonly called 'Urdu,' has previously been called *Hind(a)vī, Hindūī, Dehlavī, Kharī Bolī, Hindustānī* and even Hindi" (2009, 243). Walter Hakala in narrating the history of how the language we know as "Urdu" came into existence, reflects on the complicated and evasive history of Hindi and Urdu: "Scholars, politicians, and ordinary native speakers, alike have struggled to explain how *hindwi*—a term used in Persian scholarship until the eighteenth century to describe a spectrum of unwritten dialects spoken from the Indus River eastward to the Bay of Bengal—evolved into two competing linguistic registers: Urdu and what's called Modern Standard Hindi" (2016, 7).

"Hindi" and "Urdu" are therefore not self-evident and neutral terms but index a long, complex history starting from the nineteenth century, when British administrators along with language activists and religious nationalists drew boundaries between "two styles of a single mutually intelligible language which shared a common grammar" (Hakala 2016, 7–8).[37] By 1900, Hindi and Urdu were commonly regarded as two distinct languages associated with distinct religious communities—Hindi with Hindus and Urdu with Muslims, even though at the level of everyday speech in terms of grammar and vocabulary, Hindi and Urdu are mutually intelligible and interchangeable (Everaert 2009; Lunn 2018; Rai 2001; Ravikant 2022). For example, literary historian Alok Rai asserts, "One man's Hindi is another man's Urdu. And vice versa" (2001, 11). The main and visible site of difference between the two is the script. Hindi uses the Sanskrit-based Devanagari script and Urdu uses the Arabic-derived Nastaliq script, but as Christopher King outlines in his book *One Language, Two Scripts* (1994), this scriptural bifurcation is also the result of colonial policy, native activism, and religious nationalism. Rai comments, "It is after all a rather special kind of boundary dispute—due at least in part to the fact that there *is* no boundary, but different groups of people have at different times found it expedient to insist that there is or ought to be one" (2001, 16).

The ambiguity that besets trying to define and demarcate Hindi and Urdu from one another is amplified further with the term "Hindustani" (Alonso 2023; Lunn 2018). While some scholars claim that by the turn of the nineteenth century the British used the term to refer to Urdu (Hakala 2016), others assert the term was popularized in the late eighteenth century by the British in distinction to Urdu (Orsini 2009), and others maintain that "Hindustani" was used by the British to denote the common language of communication across northern

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India (Everaert 2009; Lahiri 2016; Lelyveld 1993). Madhumita Lahiri discusses the "definitional problem of 'Hindustani'" and summarizes the main approaches to defining the term: "As a single language of which Urdu and Hindi are two specialized styles; an ideological fiction invented to bridge the distinct languages of Hindi and Urdu; and a common space between the two distinct languages of Hindi and Urdu" (2016, 62). Lahiri defines Hindustani as a "colloquial register of language commonly used across the northern part of South Asia, both in India and Pakistan" (62).

While the British may have identified or even named the language, Lahiri argues that Hindustani emerged as an anticolonial idiom and "politicized *self*-description," after Hindi and Urdu became separated into distinct languages identified with separate religious communities (2016). Examining statements made by the Progressive Writers Association and the Indian National Congress, which proclaimed the commonalities between Hindi and Urdu speakers in the realm of everyday life, Lahiri avers that "Hindustani as a political commitment challenged the increasing assertion of Hindu and Muslim national-cultural difference, but also the elite insistence upon the proper use of language, whether that be Persianized Urdu or Sanskritized Hindi" (66). For example, in 1925, the Indian National Congress declared Hindustani to be the lingua franca of India—a position that was strongly supported by Gandhi. In 1937, Nehru wrote a pamphlet, "The Question of Language," in which he defined Hindustani as a "golden mean" between Hindi and Urdu: "What is Hindustani? Vaguely we say this word includes both Hindi and Urdu, as spoken and as written in the two scripts, and we endeavour to strike a golden mean between the two, and call this idea of ours Hindustani" (in Lahiri 2016, 66–67).

Despite the enthusiasm for Hindustani on the part of Gandhi and Nehru, it did not take off as a lingua franca throughout India given the country's tremendous linguistic diversity. Furthermore, according to historian Granville Austin, "Partition [of British India into India and Pakistan] killed Hindustani" (1966, 266) as the language was associated with Muslims who were blamed for the division of the country. Where Hindustani did take root and thrive, however, was the Bombay film industry (Lahiri 2016; Lelyveld 2009; Lunn 2015).[38] David Lunn refers to the films produced by the industry as "Hindustani" rather than "Hindi" since the films contained both Hindi and Urdu at a moment when the dominant discourse was that the languages were incommensurable and one had to choose between them (2015, 22). In his exploration of the linguistic strategies employed by scriptwriters, lyricists, and producers of 1940s Bombay cinema, Lunn argues that because film was an oral medium, it was able to develop and "crystallize" a "neutral, unmarked register of Hindustani," bypassing the "vitriol

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and bright-line divisions" between Hindi and Urdu that characterized the literary and publishing worlds in preindependence India (1–2). Since the Bombay film industry was located far from the Hindi "heartland" of the United Provinces (present day Uttar Pradesh), Lunn claims that Hindustani was allowed to "naturally occupy the linguistic space opened up by the advent of sound in film" (21).

While I will be discussing in greater detail in chapter 1 the unique linguistic register developed for cinema with the advent of sound, I want to include here some statements made by noted screenwriter, director, and journalist K. A. Abbas that resonates with the aspirations that Gandhi and Nehru had for Hindustani. During his address, "A Link Language for the Common Man," delivered at a seminar entitled "Language and Society in India" held in 1969 at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study in Simla, Abbas states, "The Hindi films, whatever their aesthetic and artistic quality, are veritable schools for the propagation of the national language for the future. It would be more correct to call them *Hindustani* films for they deliberately use a simple idiom, which will have the chance of being understood all over India—from Kashmir to Cape Comorin" (1969, 31). Abbas's comments illustrate that intelligibility was the dominant value within the Bombay film industry during its early history—encapsulated by the term "Hindustani"—which coalesced with the nation-building projects of Nehruvian India.

How did the triad of "Hindi-Urdu-Hindustani" manifest during my research? "Hindi" was the most used and least self-conscious or remarked on descriptor—"Hindi films, Hindi cinema, Hindi film industry"—by members of the Bombay film industry. Within the dubbing industry, "Hindi" was the operative category into which English language content was being dubbed. As it was the common term used within daily parlance by my interlocutors, I use "Hindi" throughout this book rather than Hindi-Urdu or Hindustani but hope that this brief exposition of the history of this nomenclature as well as my discussions in the first two chapters of the book gesture toward the complexity of the category. "Hindustani" was not a commonly used term; I only encountered it during interviews with some screenwriters when they reflected on the changing nature of dialogue within the industry, which I discuss in chapter 2.

What about "Urdu"? Scholars have pointed out that after Partition, whereby Urdu became the official language of Pakistan, the only site in newly independent India where Urdu was kept alive and even flourished was the Bombay film industry (Bhaskar and Allen 2009; Chakravarty 1993; Haham 2016; Kesavan 1994; Mazumdar 2001–2002; Roy 2014). This is because of the presence of so many Urdu poets, playwrights, and novelists who supported their literary endeavors by

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working in the film industry.[39] Certain prominent members of the industry such as the screenwriter and lyricist Javed Akhtar contend that it is a misnomer to call the films "Hindi films," when the films are actually in Urdu (Haham 2016, 6). Even though the lines between Hindi and Urdu are extremely blurred, as I have discussed, and much of the common vocabulary used in film dialogue could be classified as Urdu due to its Perso-Arabic roots (Kesavan 1994), in my research I found that Urdu had become a marked category and linguistic register rather than a default unmarked one. During interviews, some filmmakers commented on the "beauty" of Urdu and lamented its "disappearance" and its concomitant poetry, romance, and finesse.[40] In the dubbing studio, Urdu was indexed mainly by issues of pronunciation, specifically having to do with the use of a diacritic called a *nuqta* (a dot placed under a letter) that marked the vocalization of certain consonants as Urdu.

The Place of Hinglish?

Given that this is a book investigating the relationship between Hindi and English within Mumbai's media worlds, readers may be wondering about the presence and status of "Hinglish," which generally refers to the variety of ways that Hindi and English are mixed across multiple sites. The language of my fieldwork could be characterized as Hinglish in that my interviews and conversations were in a mix of Hindi and English, both in terms of code-switching (moving back and forth between Hindi and English) and code-mixing (using English words within Hindi sentences and vice versa). However, when Hinglish is defined as "enacting a conscious accenting of words and phrases" and "always putting quotation marks around phrases, drawing attention to the particular way in which they are spoken" (Orsini and Ravikant 2022, 3), then my fieldwork appears more bilingual than "Hinglish."

While the scholarship on Hinglish is rich and diverse (Kothari and Snell 2011; Orsini and Ravikant 2022), the mention and discussion of Hinglish as a distinct linguistic practice was minimal during my fieldwork, mainly surfacing during my interviews rather than in informal conversations or observations. Within the film industry, there were two primary sentiments regarding the term. "Hinglish" operated as an index of the deterioration of language skills and language loss—a sign that people were losing touch with Hindi. For example, screenwriter Sanyukta Chawla complained, "We've actually come to a point where I often hear, 'There's too much Hindi Sanyukta. We're looking for "Hinglish"'—this new word. It's impossible for me to use the word '*daftar*,' I have to say 'office.' It's more 'conversational' apparently if I say, '*mujhe* late *ho raha hai*' [I'm running

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late] rather than '*mujhe der ho rahi hai*.'"[41] The other attitude about Hinglish in the film industry was that it was the parlance of urban North India, and so if one wanted to accurately represent a contemporary urban setting then one had to write dialogue that included the English loan words that had become part of people's everyday speech. This viewpoint was articulated by screenwriter Ritu Bhatia, who asserted, "Hinglish is an acceptable format, right? Because that's how real people talk around you in any city in this country. They talk in English and in Hindi; a lot of words have gotten accepted like 'time.' 'Time *kya hua hai*?' [What's the time?] Nobody says, '*Waqt kya hua?' ya 'Samay kya hua hai?*' Rarely will you find someone who'll say that."[42]

In the dubbing industry, the attitudes about Hinglish were more dispassionate and referred to both code-switching and code-mixing. An example of the first is the following explanation by dubbing director Anju Jamwal, speaking about the decisions taken when dubbing a television show geared toward teenagers. Because our interview was conducted in Hindi, in what follows I have italicized my translation to indicate that she was speaking in Hindi and kept the words that were originally in English in roman to illustrate her code-mixing—a practice that I use throughout the book. She said, "*Now some shows are only for* teenagers *and so there we use* Hinglish. *The way* teenagers *talk—they'll say four* sentences *in Hindi and two* sentences *in* English. *So we use* Hinglish *to try to reflect that*."[43] Amrita Pandit, an executive at Disney India, when discussing the dubbing of Marvel films into Hindi, used Hinglish to refer to the presence and familiarity with English, which meant that some words did not have to be translated. She pointed out, "It's also very Hinglish nowadays. In *Civil War* there were a lot of English words. You don't have to translate 'shield.' I'm not a fervent Marvel movie watcher, but 'shield' is something everyone knows, so there's no need to translate what shield stands for because everyone knows what that is."[44] The recognition that every single word in a Hollywood film did not need to be translated into Hindi was actually a dramatic shift in practice from the 1990s and early 2000s. Mona Shetty relayed how her clients, by which she meant the Indian representatives of Hollywood studios, were initially very rigid in their instructions:

> There was a time when it was very clearly—all the clients would tell us—"No English words. Only Hindi words." So, we wouldn't even say "Good morning, good afternoon, good night" and "Thank you" or "Hello" and everything would be Hindi. And that is when we would also start feeling that this is a little bit unnatural. First of all, you're watching Westerners; secondly, every word does not always have an equivalent in another language, and also in our daily language now, we don't speak pure Hindi

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> anymore, at least those of us who live in the Metros don't. . . . Now we really try and tell our clients, that "You know, we have to move away from this mandate of dubbing everything in pure Hindi. It's unnatural. Let's go with whatever sounds natural to the ear, whatever the character sounds good saying. So, if he has to say, "Hi, how are you?" he will say, "Hi, how are you," and then break into a Hindi line.[45]

The characterization of not using any English in dubbed dialogue as "unnatural" points to the prosaic presence of English in everyday parlance in India and by association the "naturalness" of Hinglish. Shetty discussed how in the past she had to convince her clients that using a few English words like "yes, no, thank you" would not impede comprehension in the Hindi-speaking belts that were the target audience for dubbed content, illustrating the very rigid principle of intelligibility that governed dubbing in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Shetty's remarks also illustrate how in their translation practices dubbing professionals strive to craft speech that sounds "colloquial" and "natural," which is a central feature of the principle of authenticity. While media makers acknowledge the prosaic nature of English in urban India and English plays an important role in media production, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has been in political power at the national level since 2014, expresses hostility toward English and seeks to reduce its role in public life. The next section discusses the varied ways that the BJP tries to promote Hindi and the challenges that its Hindu nationalist agenda poses for media makers in Mumbai.

Hindi, English, and Media Making in the Age of Hindutva

On April 7, 2022, Union Home Minister Amit Shah, who was presiding over the thirty-seventh meeting of the Parliamentary Official Language Committee, asserted that Hindi should be accepted as an alternative to English (but not to local languages), that the language of governance should solely be in Hindi, and that Hindi should be used by citizens from different states to communicate with each other (in PTI 2022). There was an immediate backlash by political leaders and celebrities from the southern Indian states decrying Shah's statements as an example of "Hindi imperialism" and posting tweets on X with hashtag phrases such as #StopHindiImposition and #IndiaAgainstHindiImposition. For example, the chief minister of Tamil Nadu, M. K. Stalin, tweeted, "Union Home Minister Shah asking people to use Hindi instead of English is an act that will hurt the unity of India. The BJP continues to engage with its job of eroding the diversity of India" (*Quint* 2022).

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However, this renewed push for Hindi's prominence in governance and as a pan-Indian link language replacing English is not new; it traces back to the very origins of India as a modern nation-state, specifically to the intense Constituent Assembly debates, where language proved to be one of the most contentious subjects during the drafting of the Indian Constitution (Austin 1966; Guha 2007). The Constitution, ratified in 1950, did not adopt a single national language, or *rashtra bhasha*. Instead, Part XVII, Chapter 1 (Articles 343–44) proclaimed Hindi in Devanagari script as the official language, *raj bhasha*, of the Union government but specified that English would continue to be used for all official purposes for fifteen years following the Constitution's commencement.[46] It further mandated the creation of a commission to recommend ways to progressively increase Hindi's use and restrict English's role in official affairs (Article 344, sections 1 and 2). However, English was also implicitly acknowledged as a de facto language of governance, with Article 348 stipulating its use in the Supreme Court, High Courts, and for all parliamentary and state legislative acts and bills. Moreover, Article 351, entitled "Directive for Development of the Hindi Language," tasked the Union government with the "duty" of promoting its spread so that it "may serve as a medium of expression for all the elements of the composite culture of India" and by drawing vocabulary primarily from Sanskrit and secondarily from other Indian languages.

As the 1965 deadline neared when Hindi would replace English as the sole official language, there was growing unrest and violent protests in southern India, especially in Tamil Nadu.[47] In 1963, the Indian Parliament passed the Official Language Bill, which legislated that English, in addition to Hindi, could continue to be used past 1965 for all official business (King 1997, 131).[48] This tension between the reality of English's role in governance and the desire to increase the use of Hindi continued to play out in Parliament as it adopted the Official Language Resolution in 1968 that stipulated, "This House resolves that a more intensive and comprehensive programme shall be prepared and implemented by the Government of India for accelerating the spread and development of Hindi and its progressive use for various official purposes of the Union" (Department of Official Language 2025, 1).[49] In June 1975, the Department of Official Language was created as an independent unit within the Ministry of Home Affairs to "promote the use of Hindi for the official purposes of the Union" (Department of Official Language 2015).[50]

Despite this governmental apparatus, historian Ramachandra Guha notes that for nearly five decades (1965–2014), the Union government did not actively promote Hindi in the country's non-Hindi-speaking regions (Guha 2025). However, since 2014, the BJP government has adopted a far more aggressive approach

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to establishing Hindi's preeminence within government and public institutions, while simultaneously trying to diminish the role of English. For example, the Department of Official Language prepares an *Annual Programme for Transacting the Official Work of the Union in Hindi*, and for 2025–2026, it states, "The use of Hindi in the Government Offices is progressively increasing but substantial business is still being done in English. The objective of Official Language policy is that normally Hindi be used in all Government business to the maximum extent possible. This will be in keeping with the spirit of the Constitution" (Department of Official Language 2025, 2). The department sets targets for originating correspondence in Hindi, but the percentages vary based on the regions involved.[51] The BJP has also prioritized Hindi for use in international contexts, which is prominently exemplified by Prime Minister Modi's addresses to the UN General Assembly in Hindi, as well as launching and funding the "Hindi @ un" project in 2018 (see *DD News* 2024). With the Department of Official Language's budget nearly tripling over the last decade, directives from the Ministry of Home Affairs now mandate Hindi's increased use on official social media accounts and websites for government departments, public sector undertakings, and banks (Ministry of Home Affairs 2024; Sharma 2024; Subramanian 2024). Further demonstrating this emphasis on Hindi within governance, significant legislation like revisions to the Indian Penal Code have been renamed with Sanskritized Hindi titles such as "*Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita*."

In education, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, though framed around multilingualism, features a renewed emphasis on the "three-language formula," which critics in non-Hindi speaking states interpret as an overt push for Hindi.[52] Seeking to remove the "inferiority complex" associated with not studying in English, the BJP government openly encourages higher education in Indian languages, including medical and engineering degrees, and actively translates educational materials (see *Times of India* 2022).[53] Furthermore, to expand Hindi's reach across diverse linguistic communities, schemes like the *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan* (Universal education program) facilitated moves to increase the number of Hindi teachers in non-Hindi-speaking regions of India.[54] These concerted actions, presented by the Union government as promoting national unity and cultural pride, are consistently met with significant resistance from non-Hindi-speaking states, which view these initiatives as an imposition on their linguistic and cultural identities and a direct challenge to English's established constitutional and practical role in official communication and interstate relations.

Guha, along with other commentators, has pointed out that when the government did not actively promote Hindi, the language actually expanded

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organically through interstate migration and more significantly through the medium of film and television.[55] He asserts, "It helped that the Hindi of the Bombay film industry and TV serials was a supple, colloquial Hindustani, not the stiff, formalised, excessively Sanskritised Hindi of All India Radio and State propaganda. . . . This growing embrace of Hindi by non-Hindi speakers and of English by Indians was, it must be stressed, voluntary and spontaneous" (2025). This point was reiterated by writer-director Tigmanshu Dhulia during our interview when I mentioned how I, as a Telugu-speaker growing up in Calcutta, had learned most of my Hindi from movies. He said, "This is what Hindi cinema has done. It has actually united the entire country. Calcutta, down south, *people watch down there which is why the films release there*. And they understand! Probably they can't speak Hindi, but at least they understand Hindi. *So* Hindi cinema *has actually* preserved the language."[56] Such accounts emphasize that the organic spread of Hindi, especially outside traditional Hindi-speaking regions, stems from the circulation of media, in stark contrast to top-down governmental efforts.

While the government has actively sought to promote Hindi and diminish English through policy, the broader cultural agenda of Hindu nationalism and majoritarianism, particularly since 2014, has transformed mass media and mainstream entertainment into a major battleground for culture wars (Bhatia 2020; Daniyal 2020; Subramanian 2022). Numerous Bollywood stars, directors, and screenwriters have been at the receiving end of an array of violence—verbal and physical, online and offline—from members of Hindu nationalist groups who find something objectionable in a film, an interview, a tweet, a photograph, or an Instagram post.[57] For example, in 2017, a BJP MP (Member of Parliament) offered a bounty of ten million rupees for someone to behead actress Deepika Padukone and director Sanjay Leela Bhansali because of objections and anger over the potential misrepresentation of a fictional Hindu Rajput queen in their film *Padmaavat*, which had been at the receiving end of Hindu extremist protests and violence throughout its production process.[58] Since 2022, #Boycott-Bollywood has been a steady rallying cry by Hindu nationalist groups on social media as a way to try to negatively impact the commercial outcome of specific films starring certain actors who are characterized as having "hurt" Hindu sentiments or being "anti-national"—that is, not being suitably patriotic or grateful for living in India.[59]

Bollywood is not the only target of Hindu nationalist ire; Netflix and Amazon Prime have both been castigated by Hindu nationalist politicians for their "anti-Hindu" content and their Indian executives threatened with arrests and

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lawsuits for "hurting religious sentiments." For example, in November 2020, a First Information Report (FIR)—a document prepared by the police when they receive information about what could be considered a "cognizable offence" and hence could arrest a person without a warrant—was filed in Madhya Pradesh by the leader of a right-wing Hindu youth organization against two Indian executives of Netflix. The individual objected to a kissing scene between a Hindu woman and a Muslim man in the Mira Nair directed web series *A Suitable Boy*, which was licensed by the streaming service for India, and demanded an apology from Netflix and the series creators and that the "offending" scene be removed.[60] In January 2021, FIRs were filed in four different states against the head of Amazon Prime Video India and the creators of its web series *Tandav*, a cynical political thriller focusing on the machinations for power at the highest reaches of Indian government, under various sections of the Indian Penal Code for "hurting religious sentiments of Hindus" and "promoting religious enmity between groups."[61]

Such controversies lurk in the background in dubbing studios and shape decisions around translation. From avoiding the word *beef* to foregoing jokes about politicians or deceased public figures, media producers in the dubbing world are extremely cautious about the way they adapt American content into Hindi and take great pains to make sure their translations would not cause offense or stir controversy. The dubbing studio is not always a site of great caution, however. When it comes to dubbing Hindi content into English for Netflix, dubbing professionals appear less inhibited in their vocabulary choices, shedding light on both the language ideologies and audience imaginaries prevalent within the dubbing world.

From the renewed political push for Hindi's prominence by the BJP, echoing decades of constitutional debate and linguistic tension, to the organic spread of Hindi through popular media, language remains a site of continuous negotiation and contestation in India. In contrast to top-down state initiatives that frequently seek to diminish English's influence or promote a Sanskritized form of Hindi, my research focuses on the dynamic and commercially driven translation practices within Mumbai's media industries. In this context, translation is less about imposing a singular linguistic vision and more about producing content that resonates with diverse audiences and navigating the pragmatic demands of a competitive global market. By examining the negotiations around language in both screenwriting and dubbing, I illuminate how an active, organic translation economy operates in the everyday multilingual realities of contemporary India.

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Methods and Plan of the Book

While I began my research with Bollywood screenwriters and writer-directors to ascertain their thoughts about the state of Hindi and the significance of English within the film industry, I soon expanded my scope to include those film practitioners who had to think about Hindi and English more systematically and materially through translation practices such as subtitling and dubbing. From 2013 to 2018, I conducted fieldwork across a range of sites: film-school classrooms, language-training institutes, dubbing studios, and film sets; and with an array of media makers and language experts: screenwriters, directors, dialect coaches, dubbing directors, voice actors, and representatives of Hollywood studios. My access to these spaces and individuals stemmed from my contacts and relationships that I had developed within the Bombay film industry over the course of nearly three decades of research and interaction.

The information, descriptions, and analysis in this book are based on a mix of formal interviews, informal conversations, observation, and participant observation. I interviewed actors, screenwriters, writer-directors, lyricists, dialect/language coaches, dub script writers, subtitlers, voice actors, dubbing directors, sound engineers, distributors, and representatives of Disney, Fox, Universal, Warner Bros., and Netflix. I observed film sets, film-school screenwriting classes, screenwriting workshops created specifically for nonprofessionals, a Hindi class for aspiring actors, and the dubbing process. While doing fieldwork in a dubbing studio in 2018, I was presented with a unique opportunity, reflecting the serendipitous nature of ethnographic fieldwork, to write the English dub scripts for all eight episodes of season 1 of *Sacred Games*—Netflix's first original series in Hindi that was released in July 2018. Translating the Hindi dialogues into English and participating in the dubbing of this critically acclaimed series allowed me to have an insider's view, highlighting contradictions and conflicts over linguistic and cultural translation that provided me with invaluable material and insights for this book.

I have organized my discussion of the centrality of translation and transcreation, the symbiotic relationship between Hindi and English, the interplay between the regimes of profit and prestige, and how media makers calibrate the principles of intelligibility, authenticity, affinity, and fidelity that structure translation practices in Mumbai's media worlds across four chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 are focused on screenwriting in the Bombay film industry and explore how the principles of intelligibility and authenticity operate within the world of Hindi film production. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on dubbing and illustrate how principles of affinity and fidelity, in addition to intelligibility and authenticity, govern

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translation practices related to Hollywood and Netflix content circulating in India and globally.

The first chapter focuses on the centrality of English and translation in the scripting process of the contemporary Bombay film industry. The vast majority of scripts are first written in English and then transcreated into Hindi, either by the original screenwriter or a dialogue writer who has been hired for the task. Instead of indexing the precarity of Hindi, I argue that the scripting process clearly demonstrates the symbiotic relationship that exists between English and Hindi within the Bombay film industry. At the scripting stage, English is infrastructural in terms of both being the foundation of a screenplay and enabling the circulation of the story or script through the preproduction process. A screenplay written in English, however, cannot accrue further value—circulate within a regime of profit—nor can a film be made until the script has been rendered into Hindi. In this manner, Hindi, English, and transcreation are central to the production culture and political economy of the Bombay film industry, with its linguistic choices critically oriented toward market demands.

The increased presence of English in the Bombay film industry has coincided with the appearance of much more diverse and regionally specific registers of spoken Hindi within films, which is a sharp departure from the register historically developed by Bombay filmmakers who were centrally concerned with making their films intelligible widely across India. Chapter 2 examines the focus on linguistic authenticity and regional dialects of Hindi that became prevalent from 2006 onward, which enabled certain screenwriters and directors from North India, specifically the "Hindi heartland," to deploy their linguistic skill in Hindi as a form of cultural capital and a mode of elaborating distinction and generating value within the film industry. Rather than being paradoxical, I argue that the turn toward more localized registers of Hindi in film dialogue is integrally connected to the increased prevalence of English within the film industry. Both phenomena emerge from the same structural transformations that have beset the industry since the mid-2000s, a context in which the ongoing contestation between a regime of profit and a regime of prestige become critically evident.

By the mid-2000s, dubbed Hollywood films had become a consistent presence in the Indian cinematic landscape. Chapter 3 examines how the "global-popular" is produced by examining the dubbing of Hollywood films into Hindi and describes the varied ways that dubbing professionals navigate and negotiate the complex act of rendering dialogue in Hindi when the original lines are written in English, a process they often refer to as transcreation. It examines the language ideologies that emerge during the dubbing process and details how dubbing professionals calibrate the principles of intelligibility, affinity, and

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fidelity in their translation practices. I demonstrate the significance of audience imaginaries in the dubbing process and argue that these acts of transcreation do not follow expected or conventional hierarchies between Hindi and English but rather can even recalibrate the prestige of Hindi versus English in the Indian public sphere.

Chapter 4 examines the challenges and dilemmas that emerge from trying to translate media content into a globally popular idiom when the target audience is unknown and details the choices and decisions made by dubbing professionals despite this uncertainty. I focus on the scripting and dubbing into English of Netflix's first Hindi original series, *Sacred Games* (season 1) (itself adapted from the English novel by Vikram Chandra), for which I translated and cowrote the English dub script. As the series was written and directed by Hindi filmmakers who were part of the wave from North India championing linguistic authenticity discussed in chapter 2, the original dialogue and sociocultural context, or a combination of both, posed particular difficulties for dubbing professionals. The uncertainty about the target audience initially resulted in a greater concern with social and linguistic verisimilitude—in other words, with authenticity—rather than with intelligibility or affinity. I outline the tensions between the principles of authenticity and fidelity championed by Indian dubbing professionals and those of intelligibility and affinity emphasized by the Netflix producers, which illuminate the relationship between language ideologies, audience imaginaries, and commercial imperatives. I reveal how dubbing *Sacred Games* into English was not as straightforward and self-evident as Netflix had originally envisioned because of the distinct and opposing ideologies about English that were in play during the process.

My conclusion discusses some more recent controversies around language, filmmaking, and translation that erupted in India after I finished my fieldwork. I contextualize these events against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly raised the profile and value of screen translation practices such as dubbing. These controversies speak to the ongoing significance of mass media in the politics of linguistic and regional identity in India. Even though the research for the book was conducted in an era prior to the widespread commercial disruption of generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, I speculate on the implications of and potential impacts of AI on audiovisual translation.

A note on names and pseudonyms: I have followed a mixed practice in terms of names and pseudonyms. When quoting from formal interviews, I have used the full names of people unless they requested anonymity. I have used pseudonyms in the course of describing my observations of events or processes and when relaying interactions or casual conversations with my interlocutors.

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Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. I will be discussing the history behind the terms "Hindi" and "Hindustani" later in the chapter.

2. Bengali, Bhojpuri, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Tamil, and Telugu have been commercially viable industries consistently; Punjabi could be included but the commercial success of that industry has been more sporadic. Nigeria is another country that has multiple film industries operating in different languages.

3. Mamula and Patti (2016) make a case for film studies to acknowledge and appreciate the role played by linguistic difference in the history of cinema. They have a capacious view of multilingualism and state that they are interested in its "traces beyond the soundtrack." Their edited volume contains essays exploring linguistic difference in cinema across a variety of national contexts in Europe, Asia, Africa, and North America.

4. From the mid-2000s, Mumbai has also been the center of Bhojpuri (a language originating in eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar) film production. See Hardy (2010, 2015) for a discussion of how Bhojpuri cinema complicates the associations between region, language, and audience.

5. The implications of this difference ranged from higher tax rates on Hindi films and state subsidies for the production of films in languages other than Hindi. See Ganti (1998) for a further explanation and discussion of this issue.

6. Given the complexity of the term "Hindi" that I will be discussing later in the chapter, I will be using the phrase "Bombay film industry" interchangeably with "Bollywood" throughout this book unless I am quoting specifically from interviews or other sources that label the industry otherwise.

7. This is a feature, to a limited extent, of the southern Indian film industries in India as well. For example, there are many actresses working in the Tamil and Telugu industries who do not know those languages. See Nakassis (2015, 2023) for a discussion of the "absence" of "Tamil speaking heroines." See Hughes (2010) for a discussion of the multilingual and cosmopolitan nature of Tamil filmmaking in the 1930s. Karan Bali's

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documentary *An American in Madras* (2014) profiles Ellis R. Dungan, an American director, who made a number of films in Tamil even though he did not know any Tamil. See Bali (2022) for a more complete discussion of Dungan. Pandian (2015) mentions briefly the multilingual nature of the personnel in the contemporary Tamil industry.

8. For example, Sawhney (2021) discusses how Tolstoy's novel *Resurrection* was made into the Hindi film *Duniya Kya Hai* in 1937; Smith (2013) discusses the remaking of the Korean film *Oldboy* into the Hindi *Zinda* (2006). Filmmakers like V. Shantaram frequently made separate Hindi and Marathi versions of their films. I have written about the adaptation or "Indianization" of Hollywood films into Hindi (Ganti 2002).

9. E. Gabriel Dattatreyan (2020) and Jaspal Singh (2021) have detailed how forms of cultural production such as hip-hop in India are also reliant on translation; Spencer Chen's research on the development of *peiyin* (dubbing and voiceover) in Taiwan describes *peiyin* as a key social force shaping Taiwan's "sociolinguistic soundscape" (2022) as the industry shifted away from a state-enforced Mandarin toward incorporating diverse Sinitic languages.

10. See Gambier (2023) for a concise overview of the capaciousness of the term in our present times.

11. Chaume (2004, 17–22) identifies and explains ten codes that translators need to be aware of: "linguistic, paralinguistic, musical and special effects, sound arrangement, iconographic, photographic, planning, mobility, graphic, and syntactic."

12. Piyush Gupta, interview by the author, Mumbai, India, August 9, 2014.

13. Manoj Muntasir, interview by the author, Mumbai, India, May 9, 2018.

14. Mona Shetty, interview by the author, Mumbai, India, August 8, 2014.

15. Mayur Puri, interview by the author, Mumbai, India, August 1, 2016.

16. Nornes is critical of this practice as is Kozloff, who feels it is a very potent example of film scholars' disregard for dialogue and language. Kozloff asserts, "For a study of dialogue, relying on subtitles would, of course, be intellectually bogus. Subtitles only translate a portion of the spoken text, and only that portion that the subtitler has decided is most important. This filters out emphases that may be unique to the film or to that national cinema. Repetitions, interruptions, slang, curses, antiquated diction, regional accents, of course, are all lost in subtitles" (2000, 26).

17. The following scholars are exceptions: Betz (2009); Ďurovičová (2009); Dwyer (2017); Gélinas (2019); Jaeckle (2013); Kozloff (2000); Mamula and Patti (2016); Nornes (2007); Shohat and Stam (1985); Stam (2019).

18. Stephen P. Hughes mentions how within Indian film studies "Indian cinema" refers to "a kind of impossible object" (2010, 213).

19. Chion describes the most common mode of speech in film—dialogue coming from characters—as "theatrical," which serves dramatic, psychological, informative, and affective functions. He asserts, "Theatrical speech conditions not just the soundtrack but the film's mise-en-scène in the broadest sense. From screenplay to editing, by way of setting, acting, lighting, camera movements and of course acting, everything is in fact conceived, almost unconsciously, to make the characters' speech into the central action and at the same time to make us forget that this speech is what structures the film" (2019, 149).

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20. While scholars have discussed the significance of dialogue in the development, circulation, and pleasures offered by Hindi cinema (Haham 2016; Mazumdar 2001–2002; Ravikant 2022), scholars of Tamil and Telugu cinema have revealed the centrality of dialogue in performing and inculcating attachment and pride in those respective languages (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980; Baskaran 2013; Srinivas 2010; Sundar 2015).

21. See Chopra (2000) for a further discussion of the impact of *Sholay*'s dialogue on public culture in India.

22. Ghazal Dhaliwal, interview by the author, Mumbai, India, March 28, 2018.

23. This practice is not relegated just to Hindi filmmaking in India. Kathryn C. Hardy (2014), in her study of Bhojpuri filmmaking, describes instances of Bhojpuri filmmakers writing dialogue initially in Modern Standard Hindi and then having other writers translate them into Bhojpuri.

24. Esperança Bielsa (2005) points out, however, that the most well-known theorists of globalization such as Arjun Appadurai, Manuel Castells, Anthony Giddens, David Harvey, and Scott Lash and John Urry obscured and/or neglected addressing the role of translation in their discussions of global flows of culture, commodities, ideas, and communication.

25. All of these translation practices are not necessarily professional and formalized. See Dwyer (2017) for discussions of amateur forms of translation such as fansubbing and translations accompanying piracy.

26. Vinay Kumar, email to author, March 24, 2018.

27. Some of the actors and films that Mhatre has dubbed for are Matt Damon in *The Martian* (2015), Ryan Reynolds in *Deadpool* (2016), and Robert Pattinson in *The Batman* (2022).

28. Sanket Mhatre, Zoom interview by the author, March 5, 2022.

29. Several scholars who have discussed in great detail the national address of Hindi cinema—Chakravarty (1993), Joshi (2015), Rajadhyaksha (1993), Sarkar (2009), Virdi (2003), Vasudevan (2010)—have focused on tropes, themes, symbols, representation. My assertion is specifically about language/linguistic register.

30. There is an extensive literature in linguistic anthropology about language ideology. See Cavanaugh (2020); Gal (2005); Gal and Irvine (1995); Irvine and Gal (2000); Kroskrity (2000); Milroy (2001); Peterson (2003); Schieffelin et al. (1998); Woolard (2020); Woolard and Schieffelin (1994).

31. With reference to India, Harish Trivedi argues "that translation is the need of the monolingual speaker" (2006b, 103) and that in premodern India, there was no notion of translation in the Western sense of "interlinguistic transaction and transfer" (2006b, 111).

32. This is because in premodern India the idea of distinct and parallel linguistic and literary worlds itself was alien (Lelyveld 1993; Mitchell 2005; Washbrook 1991). David Lelyveld asserts, "People didn't have languages; they had linguistic repertoires that varied even within a single household, let alone marketplace, school, temple, court or devotional circle. . . . Language then was part of a flexible ideology of occasion and identity" (1993, 202). Lisa Mitchell points out that in the beginning of the nineteenth century "someone in southern India might have found it perfectly natural to compose an official letter in Persian, record a land transaction in Marathi, study music in Telugu, send a personal note

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to a relative in Tamil, and perform religious ablutions in Sanskrit, all in the course of a single day" (2005, 449).

33. Muntasir, interview.

34. For example, Gohar Siddiqui (2020) discusses the different affective registers between English and Hindi newspaper coverage about superstar Salman Khan's film releases. She argues that Hindi newspapers "use personal language about the star, as if there is a relationship and kinship that these readers have with the star via Eidi" (204). English newspapers "remain more distanced as opposed to the rural newspaper that use conversational language that constructs an intimacy of the reader with the star." Her discussion aligns with Rajagopal's characterization of English language newspapers as espousing objectivity and neutrality as primary values in contrast with Hindi language newspapers (2001, 153–60). In their ethnography of engineering students in India and their language ideologies about a mother tongue and English, LaDousa et al. found that students preferred to express emotions in their mother tongue rather than English (2022, 621).

35. In fact, many Dalit activists, intellectuals, and scholars view English as a language of emancipation, liberation, and social mobility and argue against education policies that seek to reduce the importance of English at the primary level—see Guha (2025), Shepherd (2020), Singh (2010). See Pandey (2011) and Sinha (2013) for news reports about the Dalit goddess of English.

36. For work on Hindi cinema, see Ashton and Dwyer (2021); Haham (2016); Joshi (2009); Kesavan (1994); Kothari (2011); Lahiri (2016); Lelyveld (2009); Lunn (2015); Mazumdar (2001–2002); Ravikant (2022); Roy (2014); Sundar (2015); Trivedi 2006a. For work on dubbing and audiovisual translation, see Ascheid (1997); Betz (2009); Bernabo (2017); Ďurovičová (2009); Dwyer (2017); Ferrari (2011); Mamula (2020) Nornes (2007); Shohat and Stam (1985); Whittaker (2016). Much of the scholarship on audiovisual translation, or AVT, which has been primarily literary and textual, has been overwhelmingly centered on European contexts and European languages, concerned mainly with describing the contrast between source and target languages and practically oriented toward training translators for the dubbing process. See Bosseaux (2015); Buffagni and Garzelli (2013); Chaume (2012); Cintas and Anderman (2008); Gambier (2013); Guillot (2016); Pavesi et al. (2015). A recent exception is Spencer C. Chen's (2022) very exciting work on dubbing in Taiwan, which is examined from a linguistic anthropological perspective.

37. See Ahmad (2011); Everaert (2009); Hakala (2016); King (1994); Lunn (2018); Rahman (2011); Rai (2001) to learn more about this history.

38. Another site where Hindustani flourished was radio—see Alonso (2023).

39. The prominence of Urdu is another reason for Hindutva antipathy toward the industry, and some right-wing groups started referring to the film industry as "Urduwood."

40. Connie Haham (2016, 167–88) in her research about language ideology and usage in the Bombay film industry found a very similar sentiment about Urdu.

41. Sanyukta Chawla, interview by the author, Mumbai, India, August 2, 2014.

42. Ritu Bhatia, interview by the author, Mumbai, India, January 25, 2014.

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43. Anju Jamwal, interview by the author, Mumbai, India, August 6, 2014. This application of italics to indicate Hindi words that I have translated into English is used throughout this book.

44. Amrita Pandit, interview by the author, Mumbai, India, August 8, 2016.

45. Mona Shetty, interview by the author, Mumbai, India, August 23, 2016.

46. September 14, 1949, is the day when the Constituent Assembly adopted Hindi as an official language, and since 1953, this anniversary is celebrated yearly as *Hindi Diwas*, or Hindi Day. "Union" is the term used in India for government/governance at the federal or national level; sometimes also referred to as the "Center" or "Central" government in contrast to state governments.

47. Tamil Nadu witnessed two months of anti-Hindi demonstrations and riots where more than sixty people were killed in police firings, and the unofficial death toll was three hundred. Some young people immolated themselves in protests; Hindi books were burned and Hindi signs in railway stations were defaced or destroyed (Hardgrave and Kochanek 1986, 132). See Hardgrave (1965) for greater details from that time period and Kandasamy (2024) and Mathur (2025) for a more contemporary discussion of the legacies of that time.

48. The full text of the Official Languages Act, 1963, can be found on the website of India's Department of Official Language: https://rajbhasha.gov.in/en/official-languages-act-1963.

49. The full text of the Official Language Resolution, 1968, can also be found on the website of India's Department of Official Language: https://rajbhasha.gov.in/en/official-language-resolution-1968.

50. See Sadana (2012b) for an ethnographic portrait of the Department of Official Language.

51. For example, the department divides the country into three regions: A, B, and C, with A being primarily the Hindi-majority states in northern India; B being Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Punjab; and C being the states and territories (southern India, Bengal, and northeastern India) not included in the A and B regions. Letters and email correspondence between states within the A region are required to be 100 percent in Hindi, while sixty percent of the emails originating in region C that will be directed to region A need to be in Hindi (Department of Official Language 2025, 20).

52. First proposed in 1961 by the National Integration Council, and officially adopted in 1968, this policy required all schools to teach three languages: the regional language, English, and Hindi for the non-Hindi states; and the regional language, English, and another Indian language for the Hindi-speaking states. In reality, however, most states refused to adopt this formula (Hardgrave and Kochanek 1986, 132). In 2025, the BJP's push for the formula and its threat to withhold central funds from states like Tamil Nadu that refuse to institute the teaching of Hindi has reignited language debates and controversy. See Bedi (2025); *Economic Times* (2025); Farooquee (2025); and Gohain (2025) for more details about these debates.

53. On greater details and information about the debates over whether medical education should be in local languages, see Garg (2024); Josephine (2022); and Mondal and Mondal (2024). For a more detailed scholarly discussion around the idea of "mother

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tongue" and its relationship to English, see LaDousa et al. (2022); for its impact on education policy in India, see Davis and LaDousa (2026).

54. See Hemant (2021) for further details about this scheme.

55. See Lim (2009) for a similar discussion about cinema in the Philippines serving a "nation-binding function" (337) of spreading the knowledge of Tagalog.

56. Tigmanshu Dhulia, interview by the author, Mumbai, India, January 25, 2014.

57. For example, see Bhaskar (2022); Daniyal (2020); *Economist* (2021a, 2021b); Raj and Gurmat (2022); Sengupta (2021a); *Wire* (2022).

58. The film's original title was *Padmavati*, which was changed to *Padmaavat* after numerous protests. See BBC (2018); Express News Service (2017); Express Web Desk (2017); Ray (2017).

59. Some films that have been targeted include *Laal Singh Chadda* (dir. Advait Chandan, 2022), *Brahmastra* (dir. Ayan Mukerji, 2022), *Pathaan* (dir. Siddharth Anand, 2023), and *Jawan* (dir. Atlee, 2023). In fact, there is an entire Wikipedia page titled "Hindutva Boycott of Hindi Films": https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hindutva_boycott_of_Hindi_films.

From about 2018 onward, there has also been an increase in films, mostly of the historical genre, that present a Hindu nationalist version of India's history where Muslims are portrayed as rapacious marauders and invaders and Hindu rulers as protopatriots. For more, see Ramnath (2024a).

60. This story was widely covered in the Indian and international press. See Kantar (2020) and Dwari (2020) for examples of this coverage.

61. The controversy surrounding *Tandav* was extensively covered in the Indian press. See *Hindustan Times* (2021a); *Indian Express* (2021); Kaushik and Gokhale (2021); Raja (2021); and Ramnath (2021) for further details.

CHAPTER 1. "MOST PEOPLE'S FIRST DRAFTS ARE IN ENGLISH"

Epigraphs: Varun Grover, interview by the author, Mumbai, India, July 28, 2016; Sriram Raghavan, interview by the author, Mumbai, India, August 28, 2013; Mayur Puri, interview by the author, Mumbai, India, August 7, 2014.

1. Throughout the book I use italics as a way to signal when I have translated a person's speech from Hindi into English, in addition to signaling when the language is not English.

2. The panel discussions touched on a wide variety of topics from the representation of gender in cinema, the business of TV writing, the relationship between screenwriters and film producers, and writers' rights with respect to copyright and intellectual property law in India. Out of the seven panels, three were conducted entirely in English and one was predominantly in English.

3. This may be unique to screenplays within South Asia. When I searched for screenplays in other languages—including Spanish, French, German, Portuguese, and Japanese—it appeared that those screenplays were entirely in those languages.

4. Sonntag (2003) and Saxena (2022) both discuss how some national leaders soon after independence characterized English as a type of infrastructure for nation building

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