

# Code-Switching in Urban India: A Corpus-Based Study of Hinglish in Public Signage

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## Abstract

This study investigates the prevalence and patterns of Hinglish code-switching in public signage across Delhi and Mumbai. Drawing upon photographic documentation and corpus-based analysis, it explores how bilingual signage reflects identity, consumer orientation, and linguistic fluidity in urban India. Hinglish in public signage operates not merely as a functional communicative device but as a performative act of hybrid identity construction. By situating findings within sociolinguistic theory and linguistic landscape research, this paper argues that urban signage functions as a site of cultural negotiation, where language choices communicate social belonging, economic aspiration, and symbolic power.

**Keywords:** Hinglish, Code-Switching, Linguistic Landscape, Urban India, Corpus

Linguistics, Identity

## Introduction

Urban India is a multilingual ecosystem where English and Hindi frequently intermingle in everyday life. One of the most striking manifestations of this hybridity is Hinglish—code-switching between Hindi and English—across public signage. From billboards and shop names to graffiti and transit advertisements, Hinglish has become a visible marker of both linguistic practice and cultural identity.

In this context, signage functions beyond its utilitarian purpose of informing or advertising. It acts as a semiotic tool that embodies aspirational values, consumer targeting strategies, and sociocultural positioning. The phenomenon illustrates how bilingualism in India is not simply about language proficiency but about strategically deploying linguistic resources to signify cosmopolitanism, modernity, and local rootedness.

This study examines Hinglish in the public signage of Delhi and Mumbai, two cities that represent distinct yet interconnected linguistic landscapes. The research contributes to existing scholarship by providing a corpus-based analysis of how code-switching functions in urban semiotic spaces.

## **Literature Review**

### **Code-Switching and Sociolinguistic Perspectives**

Code-switching has been defined as the alternation between two or more languages within a single discourse (Poplack, 1980). While traditionally studied in spoken interactions, scholars increasingly recognize its relevance in written texts, including signage and advertising (Backhaus, 2007). Myers-Scotton's (1993) markedness model frames code-switching as a strategic choice motivated by identity construction, while Auer (1998) emphasizes its interactional and contextual significance.

### **Linguistic Landscapes**

Landry and Bourhis (1997) introduced the concept of the "linguistic landscape" as the visibility of languages in public signage, arguing that it reflects ethnolinguistic vitality and power relations. Subsequent research (Gorter, 2006; Blommaert, 2013) highlights the semiotic dimension of linguistic landscapes, where signage is not merely descriptive but constitutive of social meaning. Pennycook (2010) further underscores the performative dimension, where local practices shape globalized linguistic forms.

## Hinglish in India

Hinglish has been described as a hybrid code that merges the symbolic capital of English with the cultural accessibility of Hindi (Kachru, 1986; Gupta, 2012). Scholars argue that Hinglish indexes modernity, youth identity, and consumerism (Sharma, 2011; Bhatia, 2017). In commercial spaces, it functions as a marketing strategy, signaling inclusivity to bilingual consumers while retaining local resonance. However, empirical studies on Hinglish in signage remain limited, making this corpus-based approach timely and necessary.

## Methodology

### Research Sites

- **Delhi:** A bilingual capital city where Hindi and English dominate official, educational, and commercial domains.
- **Mumbai:** A multilingual hub where Marathi, Hindi, and English coexist within highly diverse socio-economic zones.

### Data Collection

- **Corpus Size:** 300 images of public signage (150 per city).
- **Sampling Zones:** Commercial districts, transit hubs, and educational areas.
- **Collection Period:** June–August 2025.
- **Documentation Method:** Digital photographic survey.

### Analytical Framework

- **Annotation:** Manual tagging of code-switching instances.
- **Categories of Switching:**
  - Lexical switches (e.g., English nouns in Hindi clauses).
  - Phrase-level switches (e.g., full slogans in English within Hindi contexts).
  - Script mixing (e.g., Hindi words in Roman orthography).
- **Software:** AntConc for frequency analysis; NVivo for thematic and symbolic coding.

## Results

### Delhi

- **Lexical Switching:** 68% of signs incorporated English nouns within Hindi text.
- **Phrase-Level Switching:** 42% used English slogans embedded in Hindi discourse.
- **Script Mixing:** 55% employed Roman orthography for Hindi words (e.g., *Aapka Style*).
- **Identity Signals:** Hinglish projected youth-centric, aspirational, and cosmopolitan values.

**Table 1**

*Types of Code-Switching in Delhi Signage (N = 150)*

#### **Code-Switching Category Frequency Percentage (%)**

|                        |     |     |
|------------------------|-----|-----|
| Lexical Switching      | 102 | 68% |
| Phrase-Level Switching | 63  | 42% |
| Script Mixing          | 83  | 55% |

### Mumbai

- **Multilingual Switching:** 33% of signs integrated Marathi-English-Hindi blends.
- **Commercial Spaces:** Hinglish was dominant in malls and high-end retail corridors.
- **Script Mixing:** Roman script frequently used for Marathi phrases.
- **Symbolism:** English conveyed modernity and global access; Hindi/Marathi indexed local pride and authenticity.

Table 2

Types of Code-Switching in Mumbai Signage (N = 150)

| Code-Switching Category                        | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|------------------------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Multilingual Switching (Marathi-Hindi-English) | 50        | 33%            |
| Phrase-Level Hinglish                          | 71        | 47%            |
| Script Mixing                                  | 78        | 52%            |

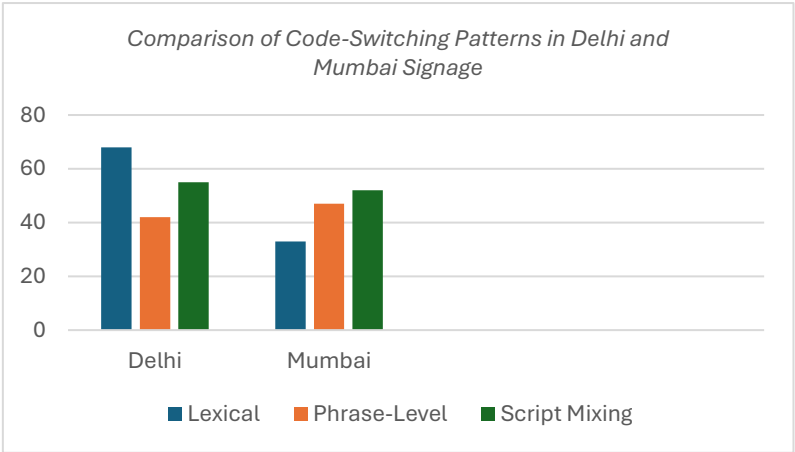
Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Hinglish in urban signage is a calculated sociolinguistic choice rather than an arbitrary practice.

In **Delhi**, Hinglish functions as a marker of cosmopolitan identity, indexing sophistication and upward mobility. It appeals particularly to middle-class and youth demographics, who see code-switching as emblematic of cultural capital.

In **Mumbai**, the signage reflects a delicate balancing act between global aspiration and regional identity. While English remains associated with modernity and professional prestige, Hindi and Marathi presence reaffirms belonging and local authenticity.

Figure 1



The prevalence of Roman orthography for Hindi and Marathi illustrates how visual accessibility is prioritized, enabling bilingual comprehension while downplaying scriptal hierarchies. This suggests a broader shift toward hybrid literacy practices in urban India. The results affirm that linguistic landscapes are not neutral reflections of society but active sites where identities are constructed and contested (Blommaert, 2013). Hinglish signage, in this sense, becomes performative—simultaneously advertising products and identities.

## Conclusion

Hinglish in public signage across Delhi and Mumbai demonstrates how language operates as a socio-semiotic resource in India's urban spaces. Far from being incidental, code-switching is a purposeful act of identity negotiation, consumer targeting, and cultural positioning.

By analyzing code-switching patterns in urban signage, this study contributes to sociolinguistics, urban semiotics, and corpus-based discourse analysis. The results highlight the symbolic role of Hinglish in shaping not only consumer culture but also the linguistic identity of India's multilingual cities.

Future research should extend this inquiry to digital signage and social media platforms, where Hinglish continues to evolve dynamically and intersects with broader global linguistic trends.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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