

Queering Hindi as a foreign language

Edition 13, 2023

Dr Ian Woolford (he/him/करता)

DOI: 10.37839/MAR2652-550X13.11

Hindi is a gendered language. When considered together with Urdu, with which it is virtually identical at the colloquial level, it is the world's most widely spoken language with grammatical gender.

This article considers how and why Hindi educators should consider accommodations for genderqueer identities in Hindi—especially nonbinary identities that are not easily accommodated by the rules of the modern standard language. These considerations are important in a foreign language classroom, where students may be new to grammatical gender and therefore more inclined than native speakers to emphasise links between grammatical and social concepts of gender. Further, as language teachers have special authority with regard to grammar and vocabulary, the effects of misgendering are heightened when committed by a language teacher.

Developments in queer pedagogy highlight a pressing need for evaluation of how language teaching can better accommodate genderqueer individuals. Most work in this area has focused on English language and ESL classrooms. French language pedagogy has also received attention, as has the study of Ancient Greek and Latin.

Little work has been published on the expressions of nonbinary identity in non-European languages or on language pedagogy in this area. The work of scholar of linguistics and anthropology Kira Hall on linguistic strategies of transgender hijra communities is the most detailed body of work on queer linguistics in Hindi. Her work reveals high degrees of linguistic creativity within hijra communities,

suggesting that strategies may also be available for nonbinary Hindi speakers. To date, no studies regarding nonbinary identities have been published relating specifically to Hindi language or pedagogy.

Given the novelty of this area of inquiry, the aims of this article are to outline the following:

- that Hindi grammar does present difficulties for some nonbinary and genderqueer individuals,
- that the misgendering required by Standard Hindi can cause distress,
- that potential strategies exist for genderqueer individuals,
- that the objections to these strategies are connected to other forms of bigotry and oppression; and
- that more work is required in this area both to identify linguistic innovation employed by genderqueer Hindi speakers and to evaluate how these developments are reflected in Hindi pedagogy and related fields.

Regarding the question of ‘how’, I suggest adjustments to Hindi grammar: some borrowed from other north Indian languages, and some that have been proposed over the past seven decades for reasons unrelated to queer theory. Regarding the question of ‘why’, the answer is multifold. The queerphobia encountered in resistance to gender-accommodating Hindi language is linked to other forms of bigotry and oppression—primarily misogyny, casteism, and Islamophobia. The bigoted idea that queer identities are foreign to India is a disturbing notion linked to supremacist ideologies that seek to define the nation, in this case a Hindu nation, based on principles of exclusion and expulsion. Questions concerning which students can properly articulate their identities in Hindi, which is posited in the supremacist framework as a ‘national language’, are therefore linked to broader questions about who deserves rights and protection under the law within India.

Misgendering and Hindi

I teach Hindi at a university in Australia. Most of our Hindi students are native English speakers from non-Indian backgrounds. Recently, a first-year student asked me how they could speak about themselves in Hindi. The student, who was nonbinary, correctly noted that Hindi requires them to identify as either masculine or feminine when speaking about themselves. Even a simple sentence such as ‘I live in Melbourne,’ required them to select a binary gender, because the verb in that sentence changes according to the gender of the subject—‘I’ (*maĩ*):

maĩ - melbourne me - rahtĩ hoon.

I - in Melbourne - **live.** (fem.)

maĩ - melbourne me - rahtā hoon.

I - in Melbourne - **live.** (masc.)

Misgendering occurs when an individual is referred to or addressed in a manner that does not match their gender identity. Anyone can be misgendered, but the harm that results from misgendering is understood to fall most heavily on genderqueer individuals. With English, the potential for misgendering notably arises when speaking about people in the third person, using the pronouns ‘she’ or ‘he’. Most solutions for accommodating genderqueer identities in English therefore concern pronouns. The singular use of ‘they’ has been present in English for centuries. And style guides and dictionaries have recently clarified that ‘they’ can refer to an individual nonbinary person. Neopronouns are also increasingly entering usage.

Hindi has no pronoun problem, because gender does not affect the form of the third-person singular pronoun—*voh*—which can mean ‘she’, ‘he’, ‘singular they’, ‘this’ or ‘it’ depending on context. But gender exerts influence over many other parts of a Hindi sentence. All nouns are assigned a gender, either masculine or feminine. A noun’s gender is reflected through rules of agreement in verbs, adjectives, and postpositions. Noun inflections are also determined by gender, with plural and

oblique forms differing for masculine and feminine nouns. While a pronoun's gender does not affect its form, its gender still exerts grammatical influence over other elements of a sentence.

Hindi students encounter these grammatical concepts in the first weeks of class. They learn that Hindi verb conjugations (in bold, below) require speakers to assign gender to people when speaking *about them* in the third person:

*Priyā - melbourne me - **rahtī** hai.*

Priya - in Melbourne - **lives**. (fem.)

*voh - melbourne me - **rahtī** hai.*

She - in Melbourne - **lives** (fem.)

*Rām - melbourne me - **rahtā** hai.*
hai.

Ram - in Melbourne - **lives** (masc.)

*voh - melbourne me - **rahtā***

He - in Melbourne - **lives** (masc.)

... or *to them* in the second person:

*āp - melbourne me - **rahtī** hai.*

You (formal.) - in Melbourne - **live**. (fem.)
(fem.)

*tum - melbourne me - **rahtī** ho.*

You (informal) - in Melbourne - **live**

*āp - melbourne me - **rahte** hai.*

You (formal.) - in Melbourne - **live** (masc.)
(masc.)

*tum - melbourne me - **rahte** ho.*

You (informal) - in Melbourne - **live**

This is in addition to Hindi's requirement that speakers self-disclose gender when speaking about themselves in the first person—*I will go, I eat, I am studying*, etc.

This presents a problem for nonbinary or otherwise genderqueer individuals who might not identify within this binary. They might be positioned outside this gender binary or fall somewhere in between. In a class where they risk not only being misgendered by their teachers and peers, but also being compelled to misgender *themselves*, genderqueer students will experience stress. For some the stress may

be minor; for others, extreme. Scholar Abbie Goldberg and co-authors document multiple ways that gender-related stress can lead to trans and otherwise genderqueer students leaving their university studies—including classroom environments that make students feel anxious, threatened, unwelcome, or erased. Scholar Cameron Whitley and co-authors find that ‘Chronic misgendering is a significant problem, especially when performed by a person in power, like a professor or instructor’.

Misgendering is not the only way that genderqueer students can experience distress in a language classroom. All students make gender-related decisions when they speak. Just as cis male and cis female individuals perform their gender, genderqueer students must make decisions about whether to ‘out’ themselves as they navigate the sentence-by-sentence potential of being either marginalised or recast within a gender binary. Disclosure of genderqueer identity—‘coming out’—is not a singular event. Coming out is a process that must be negotiated daily. The stress associated with this disclosure can have negative effects on mental health. As every self-referential Hindi statement has the potential to reveal the gender of the speaker, genderqueer Hindi students may experience some stress when speaking about themselves in even simple terms.

The above-mentioned student’s Google search for options to express their identity in Hindi turned up no helpful strategies. More distressingly, they encountered several bigoted sentiments: first, that Hindi is incapable of accommodating genderqueer identity; second, that there should be no effort made for Hindi language to accommodate genderqueer identity; and third, that the whole discussion is moot because nonbinary and all other queer identities are foreign to India—imports from the West that need not be honoured. These sentiments are incorrect on all counts. Hindi, like any language, is capable of describing the whole diversity of human experience, and the Hindi classroom is the perfect space to affirm this.

The colonial imposition of gender

Scholar Sandy O’Sullivan argues that the gender binary is a colonial imposition that, ‘like many colonial acts, remains trapped within socio-religious ideals of colonisation that then frame ongoing relationships and restrict the existence of Indigenous peoples’. A similar argument was made by the lawyers who successfully petitioned India’s Supreme Court to repeal Section 377, the colonial-era law criminalising homosexuality. Any notion within India that queer identities are foreign and indescribable in Hindi might therefore be considered a refashioning in the postcolonial state of colonial attitudes toward gender. Indeed Scholars Nishant Upadhyay and Paola Bacchetta detail how the rejection by some within India of queer people and genderqueer identities is linked to supremacist ideologies that seek to define a Hindu nation around principles of exclusion and expulsion. Both authors argue that queerphobia in India engages in xenophobic labeling of all queer identities as foreign. Hindu nationalism assigns a foreign, queer identity to anyone who opposes Hindu nationalist ideology. Muslims, Dalits, and other oppressed minorities are thus exiled along with, or even *as*, queers.

In their analysis of the repeal of Section 377, Nishant Upadhyay explores how the Hindu right has attempted to assimilate queer communities back into the Hindu nation. The Hindu nationalist project needs those who have abandoned Hinduism to come back into the fold, hence the discourse of *ghar vapsi*—‘returning home’. Upadhyay argues that the Hindu right’s recent adoption of some apparently queer-friendly attitudes is in fact part of an Islamophobic agenda that allows the Hindu right to portray Islam as inherently queerphobic when compared with a more-tolerant Hinduism.

The question of accommodating genderqueer Hindi identities in a foreign language classroom is therefore not limited to classroom issues, but also linked to high-stakes questions about who belongs in the nation. The same ideology that labels genderqueer people as unspeakable in Hindi would also see queer people, along with

other minorities or oppressed communities, ejected from the nation—either symbolically or through actual prosecution. Hence the urgency for Hindi pedagogy to take account of queer theory. Language experts should not unwittingly fuel multiple bigotries through the enforcement of grammar rules. Global discourse on this topic, including discourse taking place in Hindi, has reached the point where objections to linguistic accommodations for diverse gender identities can be attributed to ignorance, if not bigotry. These objections should be challenged, especially in university classrooms, which are subject to guidelines relating to inclusiveness and respect.

Preliminary strategies

Beginning in the late 19th century, there have been occasional suggestions to remove gender rules from Hindi. An early call came from British linguist and colonial era administrator Robert Cust, whose thoughts on freeing Hindi from ‘linguistic slavery’ reflect the Anglo-centric, if not racist attitudes of the time:

‘A still more formidable obstacle to its world wide expansion, is its slavish adherence to the shackles of gender and numbers, from which the English, destined to be the World Language of the next century, has freed itself.’

In the decades before Indian independence, many nationalist leaders and language activists settled on Hindi as the prime choice for a national language. This was the goal of the Rashtrabhasha Prachar Samiti, established in 1936. Some members of this organisation felt that Hindi’s gender rules created an obstacle to Hindi’s adoption as a national language, because they were too difficult for people from non-Hindi regions to learn. One well known member of this organisation, Kaka Kalelkar, oversaw a proposal that would remove all signs of gender from verbs. Another Indian Linguist, Suniti Kumar Chatterji, outlined a similar proposal to remove grammatical gender from the language. His proposal dealt with the fallout in various ways, including the use of a single verb form, equivalent to Standard Hindi’s

masculine singular, for all persons and numbers. And, although the forms of Hindi pronouns themselves do not reflect their gender, Chatterji's scheme would have replaced the first-person singular pronoun *mein*, with the first-person plural pronoun *hum*—'we'.

Those familiar with the language Bhojpuri, and the varieties of Hindi spoken in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar will recognise their influence on Chatterji's proposals. As these varieties were closer to the language he spoke as a child, he experienced shock when he first read a grammar of Standard Hindi, because of the great differences between the book Hindi and 'marketplace Hindi'—'Bazar Hindustani.' He proposed it be promoted, *alongside* 'High Hindi', as India's national language, because it was the language of 'the streets and the market place and of the places where the masses of the people gather.'

Many of Chatterji's suggestions sound natural to native speakers, if a bit rustic or unrefined. The use of the first-person plural pronoun *hum* to mean 'I', for example, is common in many varieties of colloquial and regional Hindi speech in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Women in this region, especially, tend to refer to themselves with verb forms that are technically masculine plural. So, although the verbs in the following two sentences are masculine plural, and the pronoun is the first-person plural *hum* ('we'), it will sound acceptable in today's colloquial speech for these sentences to mean 'I was at home', and 'I am studying Hindi.'

hum - ghar pe - thhe.

we - at home - were.

Hum - hindi - pardh rahe hain

we - Hindi - are studying.

As early as the 19th century, grammarians noted the apparently gender-neutral possibilities of plural masculine verb conjugations. In his 1882 Hindi grammar, Frederic Pincott highlighted in one example 'the use of the plural for the singular throughout; and that the ladies do not employ the feminine verb.' This usage is so

common today that I have sometimes heard, from both male and female native Hindi speakers, that although feminine singular forms are used, feminine plural verb forms do not exist.

They certainly do exist, and they are used in multiple situations and registers. Hindi literature has no shortage of examples. In her novel *Tin Kahar*, for example, one of Krishna Sobti's characters uses the feminine plural in the second person:

गाड़ी चली जा रही है। आप क्या जाएँगी नहीं ?
'The car is leaving. Aren't you going?'

And in Rangay Raghav's novel *Lakhima ki aankhein*, a female character uses feminine singular to refer to herself, and feminine plural to refer to herself and her daughter:

उसकी स्त्री ने कहा, "नहीं," उसकी आवाज बहुत ही धींी थी। उसने फुसफुसाते हुए कहा, "हम नहीं जाएँगी। साथ में रहकर ही मर जाना अच्छा होगा। मेरे पास कटार है। इसी से लड़की को मारकर मर जाऊँगी।

His wife said, 'No,' her voice was very low. She whispered, 'We will not go. It would be better to die living together. I have a dagger. With this, I will kill the girl and die.

Likewise, Yash Sinha documents multiple examples of informal second person feminine forms with the *tum* (you) pronoun, and second-person feminine plural verb forms with the formal *aap* pronoun are the norm in women's magazines such as *Grehlakshmi*.

This lack of awareness of feminine plural forms, despite their ongoing use across multiple registers, is perhaps explained by Robert Hopper and Curtis LeBaron's argument regarding the tendency of gender to 'creep into talk,' even when it is not a speaker's 'explicit or rhetorical project.'

But for a beginner Hindi student, conjugation chart in hand, gender often feels integral to the rhetorical project. Although Hindi defaults to masculine plural in

mixed-gender situations, or situations where gender is unknown, some students may find masculine plural forms too male-centred to be appropriate for nonbinary individuals. To remedy this, textbooks and lessons could be updated to acknowledge that plural masculine forms are a *possible option* for nonbinary individuals. Students should be made aware of this feature of Hindi, so they can grow into it and make their own choices about what feels right. In a foreign language class, the teacher's role is to give guidance on what options exist, and to explain how they will sound to a native speaker.

If a nonbinary student does not feel comfortable using this 'default masculine' for themselves. If, for example, they are uncomfortable saying '*hum jayenge*', for 'I will go', other options can be explored. One would be to dig deeper into Hindi's sister languages. The Bhojpuri sentence '*hum jaiba*' is gender neutral, and could perhaps be modified for Hindi. Some creative thinking with pronouns and verb conjugations may also be needed. One possibility would be mixing singular pronouns with plural verb forms, creating sentences that will sound grammatically incorrect to many Hindi speakers, but will nevertheless have clear meanings:

maĩ ghar par thhe — 'I was at home'

maĩ hindi pardh rahe thhe — 'I am studying Hindi'

Alternatively, entirely new gender-neutral verb conjugations could be devised, using a vowel other than the *ī* and *ā* that currently signal feminine and masculine conjugations. Available vowels include *u* and *o*, allowing for these gender-neutral possibilities:

voh melbourne me rahtu hai. They (sing) live in Melbourne

maĩ melbourne me rahtu hai. I live in Melbourne

These modifications will sound increasingly 'incorrect' to most native speakers, but these variations will nevertheless be easily understood. If modifications such as

Chaterji's, or more radical modifications were to be adopted to accommodate genderqueer identities, there would no doubt be objections from language purists. Such objections were indeed raised in the 1940s, most notably in 1942 address by historian Tara Chand, who argued that these modifications were inappropriate for literary expression or government documents, and instead reflected a 'debilitated and devitalized speech for the educated' and a 'patois of the vulgar'. Today, the guidelines for Australian Hindi translators published by NAATI (National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters) state 'Provincial or regional variations and non-standard usage will not be accepted.' For Urdu translators they note that 'The use of incorrect gender verbs will be penalised.'

But just as such objections cannot prevent language change in English, they should not prevent creative solutions in Hindi.

Five principles for a gender-inclusive classroom

Though it is not possible to list gender-inclusive strategies for every grammatical situation, I will conclude with five principles for Hindi classrooms.

Affirmation. Teachers should acknowledge that Hindi, as a gendered language, can cause stress for genderqueer individuals. But Hindi is still capable of conveying any identity. Every student should be taught that they can be themselves in Hindi. Even when easy solutions cannot be found, simply acknowledging the problem can alleviate some of the stress.

Flexibility and process. University students generally have clear ideas of their own gender identities, but when learning how to become themselves in a new language, they rely on their teacher and textbook to learn how to express their own genders—whether nonbinary, genderqueer, female, or male. Language teachers are in the business of teaching expressions of diverse identities, and an instructor does

not need to be genderqueer themselves to engage with queer pedagogy. Queer pedagogy is inherently destabilising and therefore allows for change. As students learn how to be themselves in a new language, what fits one day might not fit a semester later.

New forms. Hindi pedagogy should not erase genderqueer individuals in the name of upholding grammar rules. Rather, any efforts made to manipulate Hindi grammar to allow genderqueer individuals to better express their identities, or to allow anyone to speak with respect and precision about genderqueer individuals, should be welcome in Hindi classrooms and in the wider world of Hindi speakers. When no standard grammatical forms fit a student's circumstances, teachers should be ready to suggest alternatives, drawing from India's diverse linguistic landscape where possible. As Hindi becomes more accommodating of diverse identities, there will hopefully be more opportunities for Indian language specialists to pool their knowledge and work with genderqueer Hindi speakers to create gender-inclusive strategies.

Code-switching. People use multiple linguistic devices to navigate their lives. Just as students are taught when to use formal and informal language, nonbinary students should be encouraged to think about what language choices feel right in varied circumstances.

Acknowledge the opposition. In English, the singular 'they' pronoun has been common for centuries, but it still faces resistance from a vocal minority who understand neither grammar nor gender. Hindi teachers can assure students that well-respected Hindi speakers and scholars have been challenging grammatical gender rules for over a century. Some sticklers will always reject grammar modifications. This should never prevent a genderqueer student from developing a system that works for them, and should not prevent language teachers from teaching a diversity of gender expressions in Hindi.

Image by Sneha Sivarajan on Unsplash