

## Underpinning Language Variation and Freedom: Society & Emergence of Slang in Indian Cinema

Urjani CHAKRAVARTY

*Department of Communication*

*Indian Institute of Management, Indore (India)*

[urjanic@iimdr.ac.in](mailto:urjanic@iimdr.ac.in)

**REZUMAT: Susținând variația și libertatea în limbă: despre societate și apariția argoului în cinematograful indian**

De-a lungul deceniilor, filozofii limbajului, precum și experții în semantică și pragmatică ca John SEARLE (1971) au studiat cu deosebit interes toate tipurile de vorbire, dezvoltând în același timp teorii despre înțelesuri; cu toate acestea, până în prezent, principiile universale care ghidează selecția constructelor lingvistice precum argoul ne sunt încă neclare. Lucrarea de față este o analiză observațională a gamei de argouri dintr-un domeniu specific, adică Bollywood-ul (din 2007 până în anul curent), și încearcă să examineze dimensiunea și rata schimbării de limbă în ce privește șansa și libertatea ei, așa cum este exercitată sau folosită de femeile din India. Industria de film de la Bollywood s-a concentrat mereu pe oameni și structurile sociale ale contemporaneității iar asta se vede în limbajul și chiar în titlurile filmelor. Un exemplu îl reprezintă dialogurile din *Golmaal Returns*, acolo unde scenariul prevede un discurs decent în cazul personajului lui Raima Sen, în vreme ce continuarea *Golmaal 3* o impune pe Kareena Kapoor ca pe o agresoare senină. În plus, titluri cu formulări argotice sunt de asemenea folosite, ca *Lafangey Parindey* și *Kaminey*, care sunt termeni foarte bine înrădăcinați în discursul social. Accentul, însă, se pune pe felul în care tocmai această libertate și deschidere a emancipat limbajul femeilor din societatea indiană de la prioritizarea unui vocabular moale, timid și ideal până la un lexic curajos și fără perdea, inclusiv cel argotic. Astfel, lucrarea postulează că libertatea limbajului folosit de femeile indiene a căpătat o anvergură mai largă, deschizând drumul spre libertatea lor în societatea indiană.

**CUVINTE-CHEIE:** *slang, tabu, femei, libertatea și cinematografia indiană*



## ABSTRACT

Through the decades, philosophers of language as well as practitioners of semantics and pragmatics like John SEARLE (1971) while developing theories on meanings have studied all type of speech with interest; yet until date, we are still in the dark about the universal principles guiding the selection of linguistic constructions such as slangs. The present paper is an observational analysis of the scope of slangs in a specific field i.e. Bollywood (2007 until the present year) and it attempts to examine the extent and rate of language change w.r.t. its liberty and freedom as exercised or harnessed by the women in India. The Bollywood, film industry has always been about people and the society structure of contemporary time and hence been the language and even the titles of the movies. An example being the dialogues used in *Golmaal Returns* were decent discourse is scripted in Raima Sen's part while its sequel *Golmaal 3* demanded Kareena Kapoor to be a comfortable abuser. Moreover, titles with slangs are also being used like *Lafangey Parindey* and *Kaminey*, which are very commonly engrained terms used in social discourse. Emphasis however is on how this very freedom and openness has emancipated the language of the women in Indian society from a soft, shy and ideal vocab priority to the bold, open lexicons including dictionary of slangs. Thus, the paper posits that the freedom of language use for Indian women has become broader in its scope paving way for their freedom in the India society.

**KEYWORDS:** *slang, taboo, women, freedom and Indian cinema*



## RÉSUMÉ : Stimuler la variation et la liberté du langage : société et émergence de l'argot dans le cinéma indien

Au cours des décennies, les philosophes du langage ainsi que les praticiens de la sémantique et de la pragmatique comme John SEARLE (1971) ont étudié tous les types de discours avec un intérêt particulier, tout en développant des théories sur les significations. Encore jusqu'à cette date, nous sommes toujours dans l'obscurité au sujet des principes universels qui guident la sélection des constructions linguistiques telles que l'argot. Le présent document est une analyse observationnelle des argots dans un domaine spécifique, à savoir Bollywood (à partir de 2007 jusqu'à l'année présente) et tente d'examiner l'étendue et le taux de changement de langue en ce qui concerne sa chance et sa liberté, tels qu'ils sont exercés ou exploités par les femmes en Inde. L'industrie cinématographique de Bollywood s'est toujours concentrée sur les humains et sur les structures de la société contemporaine, cela étant visible dans la langue et même dans les titres des films. Un bon exemple est représenté par les dialogues utilisés dans *Golmaal Returns*, où le scénario prévoit un discours décent pour le personnage de Raima Sen, tandis que sa suite *Golmaal 3* impose que Kareena Kapoor soit un agresseur nonchalant. De plus, des titres avec des

constructions argotiques sont également utilisés comme *Lafangey*, *Parindey* et *Kaminey*, qui sont des termes très communément utilisés dans le discours social. L'accent est mis sur la façon dont cette liberté et cette ouverture ont émancipé la langue des femmes dans la société indienne, à partir d'une priorité accordée au vocabulaire douce, timide et idéal, jusqu'au lexique audacieux et ouvert, y compris celui argotique. Ainsi, notre travail postule que la liberté du langage utilisé par les femmes indiennes a gagné une envergure de plus en plus large, en ouvrant le chemin vers leur liberté dans la société indienne.

**MOTS-CLÉS :** *argot, tabou, femmes, liberté et cinéma indien*



## Introduction

*Slang, or indirection, [is] an attempt of common humanity to escape from bald literalism, and express itself illimitably, which in highest walks produces poets and poems, and doubtless in pre-historic times gave the start to, and perfected, the whole immense tangle of the old mythologies... Slang, too, is the wholesome fermentation or eructation of those processes eternally active in language, by which froth and specks are thrown up, mostly to pass away; though occasionally to settle and permanently crystallize.*

(Walt Whitman qtd. in DUMAS & LIGHTER 1978: 5)



THE FILM INDUSTRY IN INDIA is a colourful map of different languages being used and created daily for the purpose of entertainment. A platform wherein one can find a constant use of variation as a tool to sell an idea or a brand. India as a country follows several rules of language usage, which is directly reflected in the movies being made by the robust film fraternity present in the country. The remarkable part of language which one call as slangs or expletives are also in usage to create an authentic feel of the complexity being present in the society.

Contrary to the situation present in the U.S.A wherein there have been projects like the *UCLA Slang Project* (MUNRO 1993, 1997), the Indian Community belonging from different language communities, such as Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati or Punjabi still must maintain some Asian cultural and linguistic conservatism while handling slangs. Especially it is interesting to understand the verbal repertoire regarding slangs in women who are controlled by the social structure of Asia.

Indian Cinema started in the early 1900s with the dynamic duo producer Himanshu Rai and his actress wife Devika Rani. Devika Rani, also known as the "Dragon Lady" of Indian Cinema was the lead in all her movies, overshadowing her male opposites. Nonetheless her language and portrayal of

character onscreen remained of a soft-spoken Indian girl. This stereotype of women in Indian Cinema continued for over a century. Mary TALBOT discusses about stereotyping of women in her article "Gender Stereotypes: Reproduction and Challenge,"

In 1922, Otto Jespersen wrote on *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* including a single chapter on "The Woman." He presents various alleged characteristics of women as speakers, including softspokenness, irrational topic shift, and, not least, volubility and vacuity; in other words, talking a lot but making no sense.

(2003: 469)

Interestingly, TALBOT further describes how women and their verbal excess is part of social humour. Strangely, the verbal excess in women never included use of slang. In the last decade, there has been a marked change in usage of slang by the characters in the movies.

Predictably, the language that is use in our daily lives is an amalgamation of what we consider as true and that is how the same language shapes our identity. Our identity generally develops from transformations at both historical and cultural levels, which is manifested in the speech of the general populace as in the dialogues rendered by the celebrities. Entertainment follows the forces and merge with the change. Within these forces is the liberty of openness in speech for women, which played and is playing grand performance in re-shaping theatrical traditions to much greater extent. The liberty has questioned the speech seizure where woman was the object of desire, or pity most often and was subject to follow the classical norm of disciplined speech in society and therefore in theatre as well. Here is a clear picture of language change in women from a publicly accepted speech to a something we could call a taboo language, generally not accepted by society. But the fact is that, this is what can be taken as the emerging lingo of the women today. The question that linguists or pragmatists must ask,

*What is the underlying reason behind the usage variation by women in Indian society?*

The sheer lack of scholarship on slangs and their use in India shows a reticence in intellectual circles. The rare newspaper article on the subject takes on a disjunctive view of degradation in the quality presented by Film Industry as for the language usage or the possible boldness present in current day actresses. Therefore, one important aspect of slang usage is its capability to divide opinion among the speech community.

Julie COLEMAN writer of *Life of a Slang* opposes general views on slangs and provides a comprehensive lexicographical data on slangs. She deliberates some significant features of slangs followed by the present work. One feature is the use of slang for identifying with a group. Her examples come from First World War trenches, Prisons and Public Schools of Victorian Age. She also marks this usage by the oppressive environments present in these places and how the usage of slangs facilitated voice against that oppression. Another point about slangs that COLEMAN focusses on slangs are not about what the Victorians called as breeding or in present society is upbringing of the individual. She stresses on the fact that slangs are all about context, social relationships and are ever changing in nature. Consequently, theatre that matters must be the theatre in interaction with this pioneering trend.

### Why Slang?

Unsurprisingly even in socio-academic discussions, girls and women in their teens and 20s are being credited for pioneering language variation (SHIN 2013: 135). Young women apply these changes in variety of complicated ways for instance, LABOV points out, *"any theory of the causes of change must deal with the general finding that in the good majority of linguistic changes, women are a full generation ahead of men."* (2001: 501)

Today, the alternative label of womanist with current lingo is a way of today's women to stand with a new identity in the society ignoring the issues of gender, effectively equating woman with the men folk to whom, there is right to openness in speech from earlier times. This identity of women is slowly becoming dominant over the wishy-washy image with politeness which was thought to be the only form of femininity. Deborah CAMERON writes in her article "Gender and Language Ideologies" about the feminine identity as,

...the representation of women as model language users is a logical consequence of defining "skill" in communication as primarily skill in using language to maintain good interpersonal relationships, and of emphasizing traditionally "private" speech genres (e.g. conversations about personal feelings and problems) rather than "public" ones. The management of feelings and of personal relationships are culturally coded as female domains...

(2003: 461)

With the diminishing divide among the youth, the language too has been both casual and open to choice. Though in few instances the use of slang

provides a safer way for women to interact with men, the other side of practicing such speech depends on the degree of familiarity within the interaction. However, the emerging lingo in metropolis especially contains a good number of slangs in their conversation. What men to dominate women used earlier is now a part of women and today they carry the language as their shield against the same domination (WHITE 2003: 3).

It is not surprising to see a male more docile and talking politely in comparison to the females. Accordingly, this free use of slangs by women in India is a proved example of principle of opposite force. Everything, which has action, has its equal and opposite reaction and this is a reaction towards the pity, emotional and weak image of women as framed by the traditional society and these are some dynamic aspects, which the writers took from society and present it before the public in forms of drama, movies and novels. Moreover, the slangs used by women in Film Industry can range widely in meaning from the quite specific to the merely general. They can be from all possible social stances to even portrayal of different emotions. To consider the idea of linguistic anthropologists like OCHS (1991) and SILVERSTEIN (1976) who focusses on the point that particular choices in language are rarely indexed on social categories as in truth they index attitudes, stances, activities that are in turn associated with categories of people. Thus, this implicit nature of existing connection of variables with categories that allows variation to be means of nuanced socio-cultural meanings.

### Language of Identity or Style of Personae in Bollywood?

Bollywood or the mainstream Hindi Film Industry has at all times mirrored socio-cultural milieu of India (DUDRAH 2006). In the last few years so has been the use of dialogues and titles of Hindi films. Natural speech interspersed with slangs like one hear around social interaction can be for identity or power as well illustrated by MAC ARTHUR,

And so the evaluation of a language variety's effectiveness is—more often than not—a covert way of judging not the delivery of the message, but the social identity of the speaker. It is a way of exerting power.

(2014)

As well-known and discussed the Bollywood speaks for the dynamics of society which provides the testimony of language liberty experienced by women today and here the study shows the script constructed for feminine character of the movies covering the releases of last decade in Indian cinema.

To turn to the observation analysis the Bollywood films released after 2007 are deliberated upon in this section. Since this paper is not based on any theoretical assumption, the framework followed by the analysis is the possible ability as well as popularity of the actress in Indian Cinema and community of practice.

Jean LAVE and Etienne WENGER gave the framework of “community of practice” in 1991. In this paper, “community of practice” is recognised as a social construct wherein the ways of interaction style conducted by actresses (with the help of slang) in Bollywood Cinema is for the purpose of building a real personae in the movie world. As WENGER writes to define community of practice,

Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope.

(WENGER 2007)

Considering this as the starting point the first actress to be taken is Madhuri Dixit, an actress who had a long career in Bollywood for more than two decades came back with her movie *Aaja Nachle* (2007) where she as the lead actress danced to a song, “Show me your *jalwa*” picturized on Madhuri the language comes under a common tag Hinglish, a lower code dialect of both original Hindi and English. Though the word *jalwa* is more about the impression one can convey to the audience, however one meaning can be the physical openness of a person while dancing. This other meaning is depicted through the dance in the movie. Madhuri being an actress of repute the use of the lower code could have been a shocker for yesteryear audiences, however in the current scenario Hinglish is popular among Indian youth while talking to friends or choosing titles during events in colleges and many more. One detail that is more significant might be the popularity of the actress allowing the audience to be appreciative of the language variant in the form of lower code.

Instances of slang use are not difficult to come by as we study the second actress of strong public image, Rani Mukherjee in *No One Killed Jessica* (2011). She is the second in line actress to be hurling higher degree slangs like “I’ll shove it up your a...” in Hindi, using the crude ‘*GaanD*’ word with casual savoir faire while performing a part of television journalist. Centring on the context, she is an investigative journalist working on a true news of murdered girl. Rani pointed out about her slang usage that her character demanded the usage



of slang since in profession of an investigative journalist requires her to meet people from different strata of society. She also said slangs are used all the time around us in our daily life so to make the reality of the scene to be depicted expects real life language use. To prove the claim that actresses are following the community of practice the director of the film, Rajkumar Gupta explains about the changing social norms in Bollywood,

The use of abusive words has become a common phenomenon in the times we are living in. With the landscape of cinema changing and movies getting real, filmmakers and actors are ready to take liberty. The use of abuses is quite common in conversational language.

(*Spectrum: The Tribune*, March 6, 2011)

Again following the line of analysis, the third actress of great calibre plus popularity to use slang is Kareena Kapoor in *Jab We Met* (2007) where the writer has good scripted number of slangs which comprised the highest degree of in the Hindi language ...*teri maa ki...* (*Your mothers...*) which Kareena as Geet use against her boyfriend who dumps her whereas, the conversation of the actor is kept reserved. Kareena as an established and popular actress also used a similar verbal repertoire in a comedy movie *Golmaal 3* (2010) which substantiates the idea of language for a particular personae and character.

The best movie of drama genre to show slang use by women as reaction to the inequality in gender is *The Dirty Picture* (2011) cast Vidya Balan named Silk in the movie. Mainly because of her words in the movie, "entertainment, entertainment, entertainment, *mai* entertainment *hun*" ("I am entertainment") she immortalized the movie with the openness of her dialogue and her signature song *Oo Laa Laa* (*uuu laa laa*) and got best movie award and best actress award of the year for the same. The actress aired her view of the slang usage,

"I was very apprehensive while using slang. I have never used it in real life but I had to because the script demanded it. When you see the movie, you will understand that it is justified. The movie belongs to a certain terrain where slangs are part of their lingo," said Vidya.

(*Spectrum: The Tribune*, March 6, 2011)

This reflects that the character of women is made broader by making her open in expression and action as well and this is equally welcomed and appreciated by the public. Though the end of the movie was tragic, the entire story suggests the equality in thoughts and attitude of women with men.

Lafangey Parindey (2010) is another take where Deepika, the lead actress is pictured as a *chawl* (slum dwellings in Mumbai, India) girl using number



of slangs like ...*teri maa ki*... (Your mother's...) and the sentence construction much rude and bitter wherever required. The effort of the director in making the movie effective focussed on the *tapori* lingo (dialect of Hindi spoken by locals in Mumbai) used by Deepika and Neil Nitin created the ambience of the streets of Mumbai and the *chawl* life. This ambience follows from the tradition of variation where it is seen that speakers style their language as a situational adjustment facilitated through individual variables such as slangs. Pradeep Sarkar, who has directed the film *Lafangey Parindey* opines that,

The use of swear words has always been there in films. If a character is involved in a certain situation, then what's the harm in putting them in dialogues? Although, there is, indeed, a certain way of using it. Moreover, using abusive words is quite common in real life, too.

(*Spectrum: The Tribune*, March 6, 2011)

Other actresses like Asin Thottumkal to share their view about this trend in Bollywood,

I'm game for *gaalis*, if the character justifies it. In fact I think it will be quite challenging for an actress like me who doesn't utter such words in real life to spout them on screen. One just has to get under the skin of the character. Vidya Balan did it in *The Dirty Picture*, Rani Mukerjee has done it in *No One Killed Jessica* and I feel that there is no harm at all, especially because the public today is intelligent and knows that it is the character who's using the lingo. It's not me, the actress, in my personal capacity.

(*The Film Street Journal*, 2012)

In the Bollywood movies illustrated above, whatever slangs were used were part of our daily speech indicating group identity and expressing solidarity and shared cultural norms among a group. The other side of this usage can also be how actresses for the purpose of bringing a character to life embellish as well as combine slangs into their speech to create distinctive ways of dialogue delivery. These ways of deliveries by the actresses can be the key to production of personae on the silver screen, in addition these personae in turn implicitly get located in some possible social order of the country. Earlier, the use of abusive words were only limited to male actors, nevertheless, as the portrayal of women became bolder, several of the actresses are no longer shying away from interspersing dialogues with slangs. It can be seen as a worldly trend from Vivian DE KLERK work: "*Females do use derogatory language and appear to be doing so in increasing numbers.*" (1992: 278)

Where the use of taboo language is considered to provide a male more macho character, females generally use them to make sure that their equality is accepted and to stand in par with males in real life situations. As mentioned by GAL & IRVINE (1995) and earlier by IRVINE (2001) principally the slang usage is based on communities of practice so that audience can interpret the evolving social landscape and can make connections between the apparent characteristics of the actresses' speech out on the stage and their ways of speaking in society.

## Conclusion

To conclude it was seen how a woman character is transformed from a shy and restricted ideologies of speech to a strong women with a balanced amount of emotional quotient reflected from their way of communication. As a result, use of taboo is influenced by the group and its members share common lingo among themselves by appropriating particular style through which the other speakers incorporate meanings that they associate with those elements of freedom and change.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- CAMERON, D. (2003). "Gender and Language Ideologies." In: J. HOLMES & M. MEYERHOFF (eds), *The Handbook of Language and Gender*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 447-467.
- COLEMAN, J. (2012). *The Life of Slang*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- DE KLERK, V. (1992). "How Taboo are Taboo Words for Girls?" *Language in society*, 21(02), 277-289.
- DUDRAH, R. (2006). *Bollywood: Sociology goes to the Movies*. New Delhi: Sage Publishing.
- DUMAS, B. K., & J. LIGHTER (1978). "Is Slang a Word for Linguists?" *American Speech*, 53(1), 5-17.
- GAL, S., & J. T. IRVINE. (1995). "The Boundaries of Languages and Disciplines: How Ideologies Construct Difference". *Social research*. 62.967-1001.
- IRVINE, J. T. (2001). "Style as Distinctiveness: The Culture and Ideology of Linguistic Differentiation". In: P. ECKERT & J. RICKFORD (eds), *Stylistic Variation in Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 21-43.
- LABOV, W. (2001). *Principles of Linguistic Change*, vol. 2: *Social Factors*. Oxford: Blackwell.

- LAVE, J., & E. WENGER (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (first published in 1990 as Institute for Research on learning report 90-0013).
- MAC ARTHUR, H. (2014). "An Essay on Language and Power." Published 12 March 2013. Retrieved on 19 January 2017 from URL: <<http://haileymacarthur.com/portfolio/an-essay-on-language-and-power>>.
- MUNRO, P. (1993). *U.C.L.A. Slang 2*. Los Angeles, Calif.: Dept. of Linguistics, University of California, Los Angeles.
- MUNRO, P. (1997). *U.C.L.A. Slang 3*. Los Angeles, Calif.: Dept. of Linguistics, University of California, Los Angeles.
- OCHS, E. (1991). "Indexing Gender". In: A. DURANTI & C. GOODWIN (eds), *Rethinking Context*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- SEARLE, J. (ed.) (1971). *Philosophy of Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- SHIN, N. L. (2013). "Women as Leaders of Language Change: A Qualification from the Bilingual Perspective." In: *Proceedings of the 6<sup>th</sup> International Workshop on Spanish Sociolinguistics*, 135-147.
- SILVERSTEIN, M. (1976). "Shifters, Linguistic Categories, and Cultural Description." In: K. H. BASSO, & H. A. SELBY (eds), *Meaning in Anthropology*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 11-55.
- TALBOT, M. (2003). "Gender Stereotypes. Reproduction and Challenge." In: J. HOLMES, & M. MEYERHOFF (eds), *The Handbook of Language and Gender*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 468-486.
- WENGER, E. (2007). "Communities of Practice. A Brief Introduction." *Communities of Practice*. URL: <<http://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice>>. Assessed on 21/01/17.
- WHITE, A. (2003). "Womens' Usage of Specific Linguistic Functions in the Context of Casual Conversation: Analysis and discussion." URL: <<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-artslaw/cels/essays/sociolinguistics/White5.pdf>>. Assessed on 21/01/17.

## Web Sources

- "Galis - a new-found hit formula for Hindi films." *The Film Street Journal* August 2012. URL: <[http://www.thefilmstreetjournal.com/\(S\(lnu1na55t21czmabo4ccirjr\)\)/generalarticle.aspx?id=461](http://www.thefilmstreetjournal.com/(S(lnu1na55t21czmabo4ccirjr))/generalarticle.aspx?id=461)>. Bharathi & Adelaide (Celebrity inputs: Jyothi Venkatesh). Assessed on 20/01/17.

"Bollywood gets abusive." *Spectrum The Tribune*, 6 March 2011. URL: <<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2011/20110306/spectrum/main9.htm>>. Assessed on 20/01/17.

