

## Heritage Voices: Language

### Hindi



#### ABOUT THE HINDI LANGUAGE

Modern Standard Hindi is an official language of India along with English. Both Hindi and English function as lingua franca in most parts of the country. Hindi is based on *Khari* dialect, which is spoken around Delhi. Among the 22 major national languages listed in the Constitution of India, Hindi is the most widely spoken language in the country. According to the 2001 Census of India, approximately 50% percent of the people of India speak Hindi (or its regional varieties) as their first

or second language.

Hindi is an Indo-Aryan language that belongs to the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family. It is distantly related to other languages in the Indo-European family such as English, German, French and Italian. It has descended from Sanskrit and is a sister to other Indic languages like Gujarati, Punjabi, Marathi or Bengali. Hindi has borrowed heavily from different languages over several centuries and has incorporated words from Persian, Arabic, Turkish, and Portuguese.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, during and after the British Raj, Hindi has borrowed extensively from English. In fact, the influence of English on Hindi is actually greater after the British left than it was during their rule in India due to the prestige of English in higher education and the global economy. Today, Hindi-English code mixing and code switching has given rise to a mixed variety, sometimes known as *Hinglish*, which is quite frequent in informal spoken style. It is not uncommon to see urban Hindi speakers starting their sentence in Hindi and finishing it in English or vice-versa.

There are a number of regional varieties of Hindi. Some of its major varieties with a sizeable population are Awadhi, Braj, Bhojpuri, and Rajasthani. These varieties differ in varying degrees from Standard Hindi in phonetics, phonology, morphology, lexicon, and grammar. In fact, some may even be considered separate languages because of their centuries-long oral literary traditions and limited mutual intelligibility between them and Standard Hindi. Most speakers of Hindi, however, can understand and speak Standard Hindi because they learn it in school and are exposed to it through newspapers, TV, and Hindi films.

## HINDI STRUCTURE

Hindi writing is syllabic and has no separate capital letters. Its letters hang below the line, whereas English letters sit on the line. There are important differences between the Hindi and English sound systems.

Unlike English, vowel length and vowel nasalization are meaningful in Hindi. For example:

कम (*kam*) means "less" and काम (*kaam*) means "work."

पूछ (*puuch*) means "ask" and पूँछ (*puunch*) means "tail."

Hindi also makes a distinction between unaspirated and aspirated consonants and dental and retroflex consonants. For example:

पल (*pal*) means "moment" and फल (*phal*) means "fruit."

दाल (*daal*) means "lentil" and डाल (*Daal*) means "branch of a tree."

Hindi script is largely phonetic (one sound per letter and one letter per sound) which makes reading or writing in Hindi a relatively easy task.

The basic word order in Hindi is Subject-Object-Verb. The word order in Hindi is not fixed like English. Major constituents of a sentence (subject, object, and verb) can be moved around in a simple sentence for pragmatic reasons such as expressing emphasis, providing an afterthought, or flagging new information. Hindi has postpositions and not prepositions, as they are placed after their nouns and pronouns.

All nouns in Hindi are either masculine or feminine. This means an arbitrary gender is assigned to the nouns that have a neuter gender in English. For instance, "chair" is a feminine noun in Hindi, and "door" is a masculine noun. It is important to learn the gender of a noun because Hindi verbs agree with the gender and number of a noun. Further, there are no articles in Hindi. Definiteness on a noun is indicated through definite pronoun, context, or word order.

Politeness and respect are grammatically coded in the Hindi language. There are three different second person pronouns

तू, तुम, आप ("you")

and three corresponding imperative forms of a verb

आ, आओ, आइये (e.g., "come")

for expressing different levels of politeness or formality.

Respect may also be indicated by the use of a plural form of a noun, pronoun or verb in the third person plural form

वे उसके बड़े बेटे हैं (Gloss: they his older (pl. form) sons (pl. form) are;  
"He is his older son").

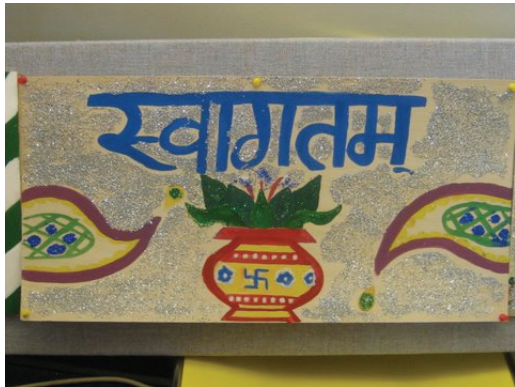
Hindi also has a special respect particle  
जी (*jii*)

which can be used after the first or last name of a person  
(e.g., गुप्ता जी "Gupta ji", संजय जी "Sanjay ji")

or after a title  
(गुरु जी 'Guru ji') or kinship term (चाचा जी 'uncle ji').

This politeness marker may also be used with words like "yes" and "no"  
for expressing politeness

जी हाँ (*jii haan*) "polite yes" and जी नहीं (*jii nahiiN*) "polite no"



## TRANSLITERATION

### Vowels

अ आ इ ई उ ऊ ए ऐ ऋ ओ औ  
a aa i ii u uu e ai ri o au

### Consonants

क ख ग घ ङ  
ka kha ga gha Na

च छ ज झ ञ  
cha chha ja jha Na

ट ठ ड ढ ण ङ ढ  
Ta Tha Da Dha Na Ra Rha

त थ द ध न  
ta tha da dha na

प फ ब भ म  
pa pha ba bha ma

य र ल व  
ya ra la va

श ष स ह  
sha Sha sa ha

### Conjunct forms (frequent only)

क्ष त्र ज्ञ श्र द्य  
ksha tra jna shra dya

### Borrowed Sounds Representation

क ख ग ज फ़  
qa kha ga za fa

### Vowel nasalization

a dot above the letter (generic nasalization)

a crest with a dot above the letter (vowel nasalization)

## HINDI AND URDU

Hindi and Urdu are listed as two different languages in India's Constitution. Although both of them have common conversational vocabulary, identical function words, and the same grammar, they are treated as two different languages because of their distinct socio-religious identities. The two languages use different scripts, and they borrow their literary and formal vocabularies from different sources.

Hindi is written in Devanagari (same as Sanskrit) and goes from left to right. It tends to borrow its high (formal and literary) vocabulary mostly from Sanskrit. Urdu is written in Nastaliq (Perso-Arabic script) that goes from right to left and it borrows its high vocabulary from Arabic and Persian. Even though the colloquial varieties of Hindi and Urdu, used in everyday conversations and in Hindi films, are similar, their formal and literary varieties are mutually incomprehensible because of different vocabularies and cultural references.

### About the Author: Dr. Surendra Gambhir



Professor Surendra Gambhir was a distinguished member of the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania between 1973 and 2008. He earned his Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of Pennsylvania. His research in the Caribbean countries and the United States has focused on language preservation and decay in immigrant communities. He has been an active participant in the heritage languages movement in the United States for over ten years, with a specialty in Hindi and Urdu. He was an invited speaker at the Regional Hindi Conference in Tokyo in 2006, and was recently honored at the World Hindi Convention in New York in 2007 as one of the 27 international scholars of Hindi. He has conducted language pedagogy workshops and has been consultant to Hindi language programs in the United States. Dr. Gambhir is the [Language Representative](#) for South Asian Languages for the Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages.

"I have dedicated my life to the study and teaching of Hindi, and it seems to me that I will need at least one more life span of hundred years to complete my mission. Hindi was not my mother tongue, but it became my dominant language when I grew up with it in New Delhi. My profession of almost four decades at the University of Pennsylvania took me deeper into the language to fathom the beauties that it offers and the challenges that it faces today, more so in India than abroad."



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Heritage Voices: Language - Hindi was compiled by Julia Von Holt for the Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages, Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), Washington DC.