

Speaking in the Third Space: Banglish and Postcolonial Identity in Urban Bengal

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Abstract:

The rise of “Banglish,” a hybrid blend of Bengali and English, represents one of the most significant linguistic developments in contemporary urban Bengal. This form is commonly held as an outcome from the decline of Bengali language after coming in contact with the English language. Rather than viewing this phenomenon as linguistic decay, this research examines Banglish as a complex social, political and cultural tool through which youth, mostly urban, try to negotiate identity and social mobility, and to some extent globalization. The study traces the historical construction of Bengali identity through the *bhadralok* standardization project, examines the theoretical framework of Homi Bhabha’s Third Space, and analyzes the transformation of diglossia into a polyglossic linguistic hierarchy. The research also explores sociopolitical motivations such as linguistic imperialism, structural patterns of code-mixing through the Matrix Language Frame model, and the commercial use of Banglish in digital branding. Though Banglish reflects adaptive multilingual creativity and global participation, there are still concerns regarding linguistic hierarchization and cultural erosion. The paper argues that Banglish represents a form of negotiated hybridity that shows both resistance and adaptation within a postcolonial digital society. Drawing upon Bhabha’s notion of mimicry, the paper demonstrates that Banglish is “almost the same, but not quite,” the idea that weakens linguistic authority by transforming English into a localized form. This weakens English authority because English loses its “pure” global form. This is how Local culture reshapes global language. As long as Bengali continues to function as the grammatical matrix, linguistic hybridity does not signify cultural surrender but rather linguistic evolution.

Keywords: Banglish, hybridity, Third Space, linguistic imperialism, *bhadralok*, polyglossia, code-switching, Bengali identity.

Introduction

The emergence of Banglish, a hybrid linguistic form combining Bengali and English, represents a major sociolinguistic transformation in contemporary urban Bengal. In everyday communication among urban youth, particularly in metropolitan centers such as Kolkata and other urban spaces of West Bengal, speakers frequently integrate English lexical elements within Bengali grammatical structures. This linguistic practice has generated intense debate among scholars, cultural critics, and language purists. While some view Banglish as evidence of the gradual decline of Bengali language and culture under the influence of globalization, others interpret it as an adaptive and creative response to changing social realities.

This study challenges the assumption that linguistic hybridity necessarily signifies cultural erosion. Instead, it examines Banglish as a complex cultural phenomenon through which speakers negotiate identity, power, and belonging within a globalized world. The paper argues that Banglish represents a form of negotiated hybridity that embodies both resistance and accommodation. It allows speakers to participate in global modernity while preserving local cultural identity.

2. Historical Context

The emergence of modern Bengali identity and linguistic standardization finds its root in the socio-political transformations of the nineteenth century. The standardized form of Bengali was predominantly set by the *bhadralok*, a group of educated urban elite people concentrated in Calcutta in the colonial period. This group played a vital part in the so-called Bengal Renaissance. They attempted to construct a unified cultural identity and developed a highly Sanskritized literary form of refined language known as *Shadhu Bhasha*. This standardized language came up with upper-class values and was remarkably different from the diverse dialects which were spoken by rural populations. This process of linguistic standardization started creating a hierarchical distinction between “pure” and “impure” forms of speech and marginalizing regional varieties and oral traditions. Thus, the modern debate around *Banglish* cannot be fully grasped without recognizing the truth that linguistic authority in Bengal was initially shaped by elite intervention.

Language in Bengal has been a key factor in class distinction and social mobility. During the colonial period, knowledge of Sanskritized Bengali and English became associated with education, and prestige. It also provided access to administrative power. For the *bhadralok* language was a tool for social boundaries between elites of cities and the rural populations. This historical pattern is still in practice in contemporary Bengal, where English proficiency stands for modernity and professional success. It also provides a kind of global competence. Therefore, the emergence of Banglish can be interpreted as a continuation of this tradition of the stratification of language. It only shifted from the influence of Sanskrit to that of English.

Just as Sanskritization once stood for cultural refinement, English borrowing now shows participation in global modernity. Consequently, Banglish is not a sudden disruption but a historical process in which language adapts to meet the shifting social and economic structures.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Homi Bhabha

3.1.1 The “Third Space”

The concept of linguistic hybridity in Banglish can be effectively examined through Homi K. Bhabha’s theory of the Third Space. According to Bhabha, cultural identity is not fixed but emerges through interaction between different cultural systems. The Third Space refers to a conceptual zone where colonizer and colonized cultures intersect, which produces new meanings and identities. This space challenges binary oppositions such as tradition versus modernity or local versus global. Banglish operates within this liminal space, where Bengali and English interact to create a hybrid linguistic form that cannot be reduced to either language. Rather than representing linguistic impurity, hybridity reflects the dynamic process of cultural negotiation in postcolonial societies. This hybrid form represents more than a simple mixture of vocabularies; it is a site of cultural negotiation where local identity intersects with global modernity. The rise of Banglish reflects what Homi K. Bhabha describes as the emergence of “interstices - the overlap and displacement of domains of difference” where collective identities are negotiated (Bhabha). Cultural identity, therefore, is not a fixed entity but a dynamic process shaped by interaction and transformation. Urban Bengali speakers use Banglish to express their simultaneous participation in global culture and local tradition, thereby creating a flexible linguistic identity that reflects contemporary realities.

Bhabha’s concept of mimicry further explains the cultural significance of Banglish. Mimicry refers to the adoption of dominant cultural practices by subordinate groups, but with subtle transformations that challenge the authority of the original. In the context of Banglish, speakers adopt English vocabulary and expressions but integrate them within Bengali grammatical structures and cultural contexts. This process demonstrates agency rather than passive imitation. By reshaping English according to local linguistic patterns, speakers assert control over global cultural influences. Banglish therefore represents a form of cultural translation that allows individuals to negotiate identity, power, and belonging. It enables speakers to access the prestige associated with English while preserving their cultural roots, creating a linguistic expression that is both global and local.

Bhabha challenges the idea of culture as a “fixed tablet of tradition,” arguing instead that it is a “complex, on-going negotiation” that produces new hybrid forms (Bhabha). This

perspective directly contests linguistic purism that treats Bengali as a static monolith threatened by English influence. Banglish demonstrates that linguistic identity evolves through historical contact and cultural exchange rather than remaining pure or isolated.

The emergence of Banglish also reflects the experience of contemporary urban youth living between competing cultural frameworks. Globalization produces what Bhabha calls an “unhomely” condition, where the boundaries between home and world become blurred (Bhabha). Urban Bengali speakers may feel distanced from traditional linguistic norms while not fully assimilated into global English culture. Banglish thus becomes a linguistic space of belonging - a hybrid medium through which speakers negotiate identity, mobility, and cultural continuity.

Rather than representing linguistic decay, Banglish should therefore be understood as a postcolonial form of cultural translation through which speakers create new modes of expression within a globalized environment.

Bhabha further argues that the “productive capacities” of the Third Space originate from colonial encounters and generate new cultural forms grounded in hybridity (Bhabha 1994). Banglish, born from colonial contact between Bengali and English, reflects this process of cultural translation. It represents a survival strategy that allows speakers to negotiate identity while participating in global modernity. Thus, Banglish should be understood as a creative and transformative linguistic practice rather than a sign of cultural loss.

Bhabha argues that all cultural meaning emerges within a “Third Space of enunciation,” a liminal zone where different cultural systems interact and produce new forms of identity (Bhabha). This space is inherently “contradictory and ambivalent,” destabilizing claims of cultural originality or purity (Bhabha). Cultural identity is therefore never fixed but continuously negotiated through historical encounters.

Bhabha further argues that the productive capacity of this Third Space has a postcolonial origin and enables the articulation of culture’s hybridity on a global scale (Bhabha). The colonial encounter between Bengali and English created the conditions for linguistic transformation that continue to shape contemporary communication. Banglish therefore represents the historical continuity of postcolonial negotiation rather than cultural disruption.

3.1.2 Colonial Mimicry and Linguistic Agency

Bhabha's concept of mimicry provides further insight into the sociopolitical function of Banglish. Mimicry describes the colonial strategy of producing a "reformed, recognizable Other" who is "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha). Colonial education policies sought to create subjects who were "Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes," thereby reproducing colonial authority through cultural imitation (Bhabha).

However, Bhabha argues that mimicry contains a "double vision" that undermines colonial authority. Because the mimicking subject never fully replicates the dominant culture, mimicry produces a "partial presence" that destabilizes the authority of the original (Bhabha). This ambivalence transforms imitation into a form of resistance.

Banglish exemplifies this process. Urban speakers adopt English vocabulary but reshape it within Bengali grammatical structures and cultural contexts. Expressions such as hybrid verb constructions demonstrate how English is localized rather than reproduced in its original form. This linguistic practice weakens the authority of English by transforming it into a Bengali-controlled system of meaning. Banglish therefore represents not passive imitation but active cultural agency.

3.1.3 Cultural Translation and "How Newness Enters the World"

Bhabha further conceptualizes hybridity as a process of cultural translation through which "newness enters the world" (Bhabha). Translation is not merely the transfer of meaning between languages but a transformative process that produces new cultural forms. Hybridity functions as a survival strategy (*sur-vivre*) that enables subjects to live on cultural borderlines.

Banglish represents such cultural translation. Urban youth refuse the binary choice between traditional Bengali and global English, instead creating a negotiated linguistic form that reflects contemporary realities. This process generates new expressive possibilities while preserving cultural continuity. From this perspective, Banglish constitutes a pragmatic survival strategy that ensures cultural participation in a globalized economy.

3.1.4 The "Unhomely" Condition and Linguistic Belonging

Bhabha's concept of the "unhomely" further explains the psychological and cultural motivations underlying linguistic hybridity. The unhomely condition arises when the boundaries between home and world become blurred, producing a sense of displacement within familiar cultural spaces (Bhabha). This condition is not homelessness but a transformation of identity within global modernity.

Urban Bengali youth often inhabit this unhomely space. Traditional linguistic norms may appear restrictive, while pure Western cultural models remain inaccessible. Banglish

becomes a linguistic home within this in-between condition—a hybrid space where speakers reconcile local heritage with global aspiration.

This displacement leads to the performance of “networked multilingualism”. For instance, the common urban trope “Banglata thik ashe na” (“My Bengali isn’t quite right”) is not necessarily a confession of failure but a recognition of a hybrid reality where the speaker identifies with the Other precisely at the point where they elude resemblance. Banglish becomes the linguistic “home” for those living in the interstices of genealogies and geographies.

3.2 Diglossia, Polyglossia, and Linguistic Hierarchy

Charles Ferguson’s foundational formulation of diglossia provides the structural framework for understanding the linguistic hierarchy of urban Bengal. Ferguson defines diglossia as a situation in which “two varieties of a language exist side by side,” each with a distinct social function (Ferguson). This definition is crucial for interpreting Banglish not as “broken” Bengali but as a functional linguistic variety operating within a structured hierarchy.

Ferguson distinguishes between a superposed High (H) variety and a Low (L) variety used for everyday communication (Ferguson). The H variety typically appears in formal domains such as education, administration, and literature, whereas the L variety is used in conversation and informal interaction. In the contemporary Bengali context, this framework has expanded into a polyglossic structure:

- English (Exoglossic High): Language of corporate authority, higher education, science, and global communication.
- Standard Bengali (Mid-High): Language of administration, literature, news, and cultural institutions.
- Banglish (Modern Low): Language of digital communication, peer interaction, and everyday urban life.

This functional specialization corresponds to Ferguson’s observation that linguistic varieties are assigned specific domains of usage, where employing the “wrong” variety may produce social embarrassment or ridicule (Ferguson). In urban Bengal, the use of highly formal Standard Bengali in casual peer interaction may appear artificial, while the absence of English competence may signal lack of social mobility. Banglish thus operates as a socially appropriate communicative medium in informal urban contexts.

Ferguson further observes that speakers typically regard the H variety as more prestigious, logical, and aesthetically superior (Ferguson). This perception persists in Bengal, where English and standardized Bengali are often associated with intellectual authority, while hybrid speech is viewed as inferior or corrupt. However, he also notes a phenomenon

of “self-deception,” in which speakers deny using the L variety despite employing it constantly in everyday communication (Ferguson). This insight directly explains the paradoxical attitude toward Banglish: many educated speakers dismiss it while simultaneously using it for digital interaction and intimate communication.

The distinction between H and L varieties is further reinforced through patterns of acquisition. Ferguson argues that the L variety is learned naturally as a mother tongue, whereas the H variety is acquired through formal education and explicit instruction (Ferguson). In contemporary urban Bengal, Banglish functions as the naturally acquired language of digital culture among youth, while Standard Bengali and English remain institutional requirements associated with schooling and professional life.

Another important feature of diglossia is the “standardization gap.” Ferguson notes that H varieties possess codified grammars, dictionaries, and established norms, whereas L varieties often lack formal standardization and written conventions (Ferguson). This explains why Banglish is frequently perceived as linguistic disorder by purists who privilege standardized forms of language. The absence of codification, however, does not indicate structural deficiency but reflects its dynamic and evolving nature.

Finally, Ferguson emphasizes the stability of diglossic systems, noting that they can persist for centuries and often resolve communicative tensions through “relatively uncodified, unstable, intermediate forms” characterized by lexical borrowing from H to L (Ferguson). Banglish represents precisely such an intermediate form. By incorporating English vocabulary into a Bengali grammatical matrix, speakers negotiate the tension between local identity and global modernity. The emergence of Banglish therefore illustrates how a 1,400-year-old language adapts to contemporary socio-economic pressures without abandoning its structural foundation.

3.3 Structural Integrity: The Matrix Language Frame (MLF)

A detailed morphosyntactic analysis of Banglish usage on social media reveals that it is a rule-bound resource rather than a haphazard “pollution” of speech. Using the Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model, researchers have identified stable patterns of integration:

- Bengali as Matrix: Bengali consistently provides the grammatical frame and system morphemes (tense, aspect, person markers), while English provides content morphemes.
- Hybrid Verb Constructions: Structures like “comment korchi” (I am commenting) or “share korbo” (I will share) use English verbs paired with Bengali auxiliaries (kor-, to do). This demonstrates high linguistic control, as the semantic action is English but the functional grammar remains Bengali.

- Noun Integration: The systematic use of Bengali determiners with English content nouns (e.g., “ei app” for ‘this app’ or “amar phone” for ‘my phone’) proves that foreign elements are being “housed” within the native system.

3.4 Platform Affordances and Networked Multilingualism

The structure of Banglish is further conditioned by “platform affordances”—the specific technological constraints and social norms of different digital environments:

- Facebook: Facilitates longer, more sophisticated “mixed turns” and monologues for extended personal narrative.
- Twitter/X: Compresses mixing into “hashtag innovations” and real-time reactions.
- Instagram: Focuses on “visual-textual integration” and searchable multilingual tags.
- YouTube: Concentrates on “comment bursts” and evaluative reaction words.

This suggests that Banglish is an “agent-driven linguistic repertoire”. Users are not “confused” between two languages; they are strategically mobilizing all available resources—text, emojis, hashtags—to construct complex identities in a digital ecology.

3.5 Commercial Institutionalization and “Cultural Confidence”

The commercial sector has successfully leveraged Banglish to boost “resonance” and “empathy” with urban consumers. Brands like Hoichoi have transitioned from niche platforms into cultural movements through campaigns like “Boldly Bangali”. This initiative celebrates authentic Bengali taste as a mark of “modern sophistication, not nostalgia,” effectively turning cultural identity into “social currency”.

Advertisers employ a “Vertical Creative Framework” for Reels, utilizing colloquial Banglish hooks (e.g., “অর্ডার করতে Inbox করুন”) to bridge the gap between local pain points and global lifestyle aspirations. Similarly, Zomato’s Durga Puja campaigns use traditional folk art like “Alpana” to celebrate street food vendors, effectively “spotlighting” the cultural fabric of the city through hybrid digital marketing.

3.6 Sociopolitical Drivers: Linguistic Imperialism

The growing influence of English in Bengal can be understood through the framework of linguistic imperialism. English has acquired immense symbolic power as the language of globalization, technological advancement, and economic progress. In urban centers such as Kolkata, proficiency in English is closely linked to employment opportunities, higher education, and social prestige. Parents increasingly prefer English-medium education for their children, believing that English competence provides a competitive advantage in national and global markets. This perception reinforces the social value of English and encourages linguistic mixing.

Unlike colonial imposition, contemporary linguistic imperialism operates through local agency. Urban populations voluntarily adopt English due to its perceived economic

benefits. This phenomenon represents a form of neo-imperialism in which global linguistic hierarchies are sustained by local aspirations. The increasing use of Banglish reflects this socio-economic pressure, as speakers attempt to maximize their social capital by incorporating English into everyday communication. While this adaptation facilitates global participation, it also raises concerns about linguistic inequality and cultural dependency.

3.7 Commercial Resonance: “Boldly Bangali”

The commercial success of Banglish demonstrates its cultural relevance and communicative effectiveness. Digital marketers increasingly use hybrid language to connect with urban consumers. Brands such as Hoichoi, Zomato, and Swiggy employ Banglish in advertising campaigns, social media posts, and promotional content to create emotional resonance with their target audience. Hybrid expressions appear more conversational and relatable than formal language, making them effective tools for consumer engagement.

Advertising strategies often incorporate colloquial Banglish phrases such as “Order korte inbox korun” or “Offer ta check kore dekho.” These expressions reflect everyday speech patterns and enhance brand authenticity. The use of Banglish also enables companies to balance global branding with local cultural identity. This phenomenon illustrates how linguistic hybridity functions as a market resource, reinforcing the social legitimacy of Banglish as a contemporary mode of communication.

4. Discussion: Survival Strategy versus Cultural Surrender

The tension between the “Survival Strategy” and “Cultural Surrender” arguments is a conflict of linguistic ideology.

The primary evidence supporting Banglish as a survival strategy lies in its pragmatism. In the “neo-imperialist” framework, English is the gatekeeper to success. Banglish allows speakers to maximize their social capital by blending the emotional authenticity of their mother tongue with the economic utility of English. It represents “linguistic adaptation” rather than decay, as the grammatical core (the Bengali matrix) remains resilient. Furthermore, by “localizing” English, speakers perform a decolonial act, recovering ownership of the language in the cyber world.

The risk of surrender is rooted in linguistic hierarchization. The “locally-driven” demand for English-medium education creates a “superior-inferior asymmetry” that can marginalize indigenous cultural religious nuances. This “linguistic neo-imperialism” may lead to identity loss for the speakers and an ultimate shift away from the mother tongue if the L variety remains stigmatized.

Furthermore, “assertive Bengaliness” centered on an urban hybrid standard can provoke anger among non-Bengali minority groups (e.g., Gorkha, Jumma, and Kokborok communities) who perceive it as condescending or overbearing. These groups have engaged

in “graphic resistance”—adopting different scripts—to distance themselves from the perceived Bengali linguistic hegemony.

6. Conclusion

The rise of Banglish represents a “negotiated hybridity”—the way a 1,400-year-old language culture adapts to the “shock of global annexation” just as it once adapted to the shock of British colonial annexation. The research hypothesis (H1) is largely validated: Banglish is a structured, agent-driven repertoire used to navigate the globalized “interstices” without losing a sense of self.

As long as the “Grammatical Matrix” remains Bengali, the infusion of English is not an end but a transformation that allows “Bengaliness” to remain “unskippable” in the 21st century. Protecting the mother tongue in a modern context requires recognizing its capacity for creativity and resilience. Banglish proves that Bengali is not a static museum piece but a living, breathing entity building a future in the vibrant, messy “Third Space” of hybridity. The rise of Banglish represents a complex process of linguistic and cultural negotiation shaped by historical, economic, and social forces. Rather than signifying linguistic decay, Banglish reflects the adaptive capacity of language within a stable diglossic system. As Ferguson suggests, linguistic hierarchies often persist through intermediate forms that mediate between competing varieties (Ferguson 336). Banglish functions as such a mediating structure, allowing Bengali to remain grammatically stable while responding to global pressures.

When viewed through Bhabha’s concept of the Third Space and Ferguson’s theory of diglossia, Banglish emerges as negotiated hybridity rather than cultural surrender. It enables speakers to navigate multiple identities while preserving the structural integrity of Bengali. Ultimately, Banglish demonstrates that language is a living system shaped by historical transformation, social aspiration, and cultural creativity.

From a Bhabhian perspective, hybridity cannot be reduced to cultural loss because the Third Space always produces new forms of identity through negotiation (Bhabha). Banglish therefore represents cultural survival rather than surrender, enabling speakers to transform global linguistic power into localized expression.

The rise of Banglish represents a complex process of linguistic and cultural negotiation shaped by historical, social, and economic forces. Rather than signifying linguistic decay, Banglish reflects the adaptive capacity of language in response to globalization and technological change. As long as Bengali continues to function as the

grammatical matrix, the language remains structurally stable while evolving to meet new communicative needs.

Banglish occupies a liminal position between resistance and accommodation, enabling speakers to navigate multiple cultural identities. It represents a negotiated hybridity that reflects both the opportunities and challenges of postcolonial modernity. The future of Bengali depends not on resisting linguistic change but on promoting balanced language policies that preserve cultural heritage while embracing linguistic innovation.

Ultimately, Banglish demonstrates that language is a living system shaped by history, power, and human creativity. Its emergence reveals how communities adapt to global transformation while maintaining local identity, highlighting the dynamic relationship between language, culture, and society.

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