

Multilingualism in Indian Stand-Up Comedy: A Discourse Analysis

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63345/ijrhs.net.v13.i9.5>

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ABSTRACT

India's rich linguistic tapestry—comprising 22 constitutionally recognized languages and hundreds of dialects—finds a unique performative expression in its stand-up comedy scene. This study undertakes a comprehensive discourse analysis of multilingual strategies employed by leading Indian comedians to interrogate how language choice functions as both a comedic device and a marker of social identity. Drawing on 250 survey responses from comedy aficionados across Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Kolkata, and Chennai, and on detailed transcriptions of fifteen specials by performers such as Vir Das, Zakir Khan, Aditi Mittal, Kanan Gill, and Kenny Sebastian, the research integrates quantitative audience perceptions with qualitative pragmatic analysis. Building on frameworks from Muysken's typology of code-mixing, Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital, and Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis, we first catalogue instances of insertional borrowings (single words/phrases), alternational switches (larger syntactic units), and congruent lexicalization (parallel mixing at multiple levels). We then examine the pragmatic functions of each pattern—such as emphasis, solidarity building, framing of punchlines, and social critique—and correlate these with audience-reported humor appreciation, perceived authenticity, and comprehension.

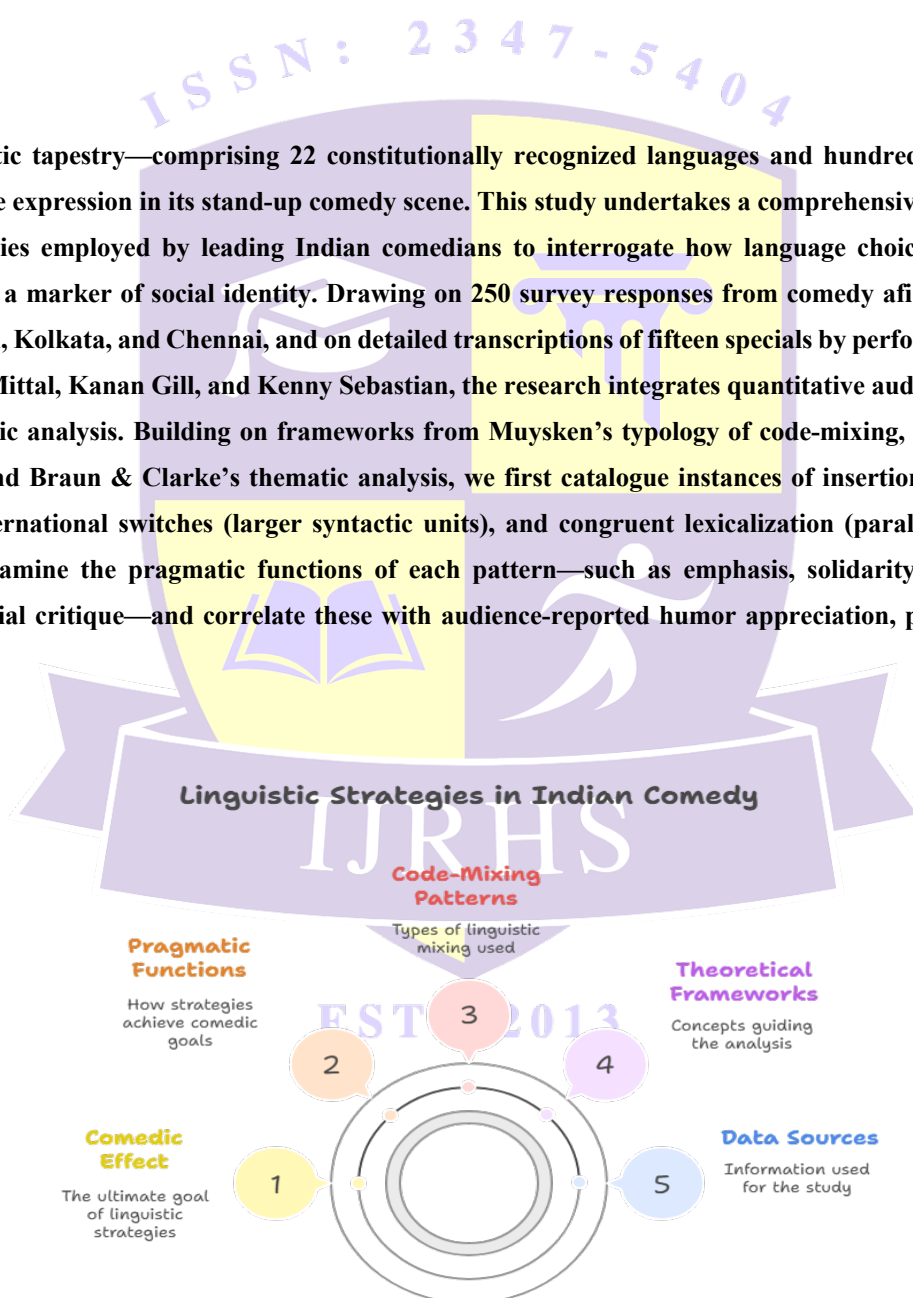


Figure-1. Linguistic Strategies in Indian Comedy

KEYWORDS

Multilingualism, Indian Stand-Up Comedy, Code-Switching, Discourse Analysis, Audience Reception

INTRODUCTION

Stand-up comedy in India has undergone explosive growth over the past decade, evolving from niche live shows in metropolitan cafés to widely streamed specials on global platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and YouTube. Amidst an audience that spans multiple generations, socioeconomic strata, and linguistic backgrounds, comedians negotiate a complex communicative terrain. Unlike monolingual comedy markets, Indian performers routinely blend English, Hindi, and regional tongues—colloquially termed “Hinglish” when mixing Hindi and English—to craft routines that resonate across subcultures. This linguistic hybridity presents both opportunities and challenges: while code-switching can amplify humor through surprise and shared cultural scripts, it may risk alienating segments of the audience unfamiliar with certain idioms or dialects.

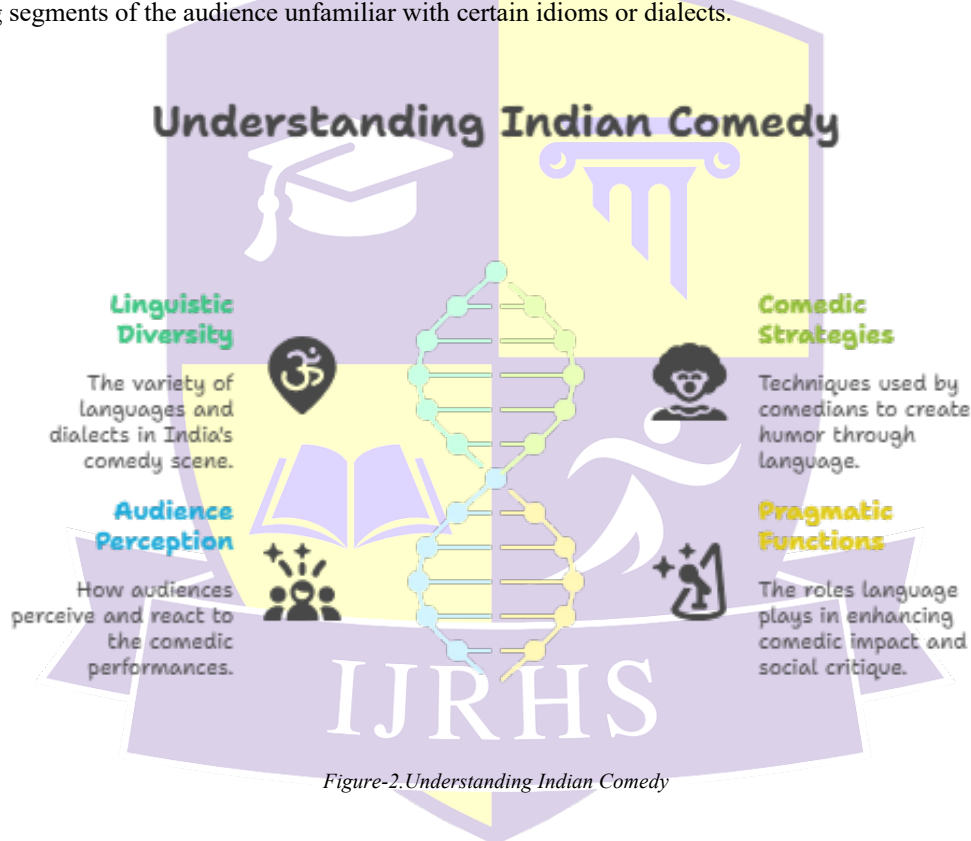


Figure-2. Understanding Indian Comedy

This study interrogates multilingualism in Indian stand-up comedy from a discourse-analytic perspective, centering on three core questions:

1. **Multilingual Strategies:** What patterns of language alternation (insertion, alternation, congruent mixing) are most prevalent in contemporary Indian comedy sets?
2. **Pragmatic Functions:** How do these language switches operate pragmatically—for emphasis, solidarity, framing, or social commentary?
3. **Audience Reception:** How do diverse audience members perceive and interpret these multilingual cues in terms of humor effectiveness, authenticity, and comprehension?

By integrating a large-scale audience survey with fine-grained discourse analysis of recorded performances, the research moves beyond anecdotal accounts to systematically map the interplay between performer choices and audience responses. It builds on foundational sociolinguistic theories—such as Muysken’s (2000) typology of code-mixing, Auer’s (1998) insights on style-shifting in conversational contexts, and Bourdieu’s (1991) notion of linguistic capital—to frame multilingualism as a resource that comedians deploy to negotiate identity, power, and cultural commentary.

The significance of this inquiry lies in its dual contributions. For sociolinguistics, it illuminates how performative contexts shape language use and vice versa, illustrating that stand-up is not merely a stage for jokes but a dynamic arena for linguistic innovation. For humor studies, it quantifies the impact of multilingual strategies on audience engagement and establishes a taxonomy of pragmatic functions that can inform both practitioners and scholars. Moreover, in the Indian media ecosystem—where digital platforms increasingly commission regional-language specials—understanding these dynamics has direct implications for content production, marketing strategies, and cultural representation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of multilingualism and humor has drawn scholarly attention across sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and performance studies. Yet few works delve specifically into India’s stand-up comedy, where linguistic diversity is both a canvas and a constraint. Below, key strands of research are reviewed and synthesized.

1. Multilingual Performance and Stylistic Variation

Early performance studies, notably Bauman (1984), conceptualized verbal art as deliberate language play for aesthetic impact. Extending this to multilingual contexts, Auer (1998) demonstrated that style-shifting in conversation—alternating between varieties—serves identity construction, group alignment, and creative expression. In Indian urban settings, speakers regularly blend Hindi, English, and regional languages in everyday interaction (Srivastava & Sharma, 2017), suggesting that stand-up comedians draw on familiar repertoires to deepen audience rapport.

2. The Mechanics of Code-Switching in Humor

Poplack’s (1980) foundational work distinguished between insertional, alternational, and congruent lexicalization strategies. Within comedic discourse, Myers-Scotton (1993) argued that code-switching yields humor through incongruity: the abrupt shift to a less-expected variety generates surprise, a key component of many jokes. Raskin’s (1985) Semantic Script Theory of Humor further posits that punchlines often hinge on script oppositions; language shifts can activate alternate scripts that refract meaning for comedic effect.

3. Pragmatic Functions in Stand-up Contexts

Double (2014) and Kumar (2020) applied discourse-analytic and conversation-analysis methods to map comedic routines’ structure—setup, build, punchline, and audience feedback loops. Recent Indian-focused analyses (Bachchan & Menon, 2021; Ramesh, 2019) illustrate how regional language insertions (e.g., Punjabi “munde,” Tamil “anna”) act as cultural indexing devices, invoking stereotypical persona traits and collective memory. Such alternations operate pragmatically to:

- **Emphasize:** English alternations can heighten punchline salience by exploiting perceived neutrality.
- **Solidarize:** Vernacular phrases foster in-group belonging, signaling shared cultural heritage.
- **Frame:** Code-switch points demarcate boundaries between narrative phases—setup versus punchline.
- **Critique:** Language shifts often preface socio-political commentary, allowing comedians to broach taboo topics indirectly.

4. Audience Reception and Linguistic Capital

Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital highlights how proficiency in prestigious varieties (e.g., English) confers social advantages. In India, urban middle classes valorize English for upward mobility, yet vernacular usage is prized for authenticity (Annamalai, 2004). Mehta & Patel (2018) found that audiences interpret code-switching as a marker of cosmopolitan identity, while too-frequent regional insertions risk comprehension loss and perceived exclusion. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for content creators aiming at pan-Indian versus region-specific markets.

5. Gaps and Research Trajectory

Despite burgeoning scholarship on code-switching in everyday discourse, stand-up comedy's unique demands—real-time audience interaction, rapid pragmatic framing, multimodal performance—remain underexplored in the Indian context. Existing studies either focus narrowly on linguistic description or on isolated qualitative accounts; few integrate audience-perception data at scale. This research addresses that gap by triangulating discourse-analytic patterns with survey-reported humor appreciation, comprehension, and authenticity judgments, thereby offering a holistic picture of performative multilingualism.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative discourse analysis of recorded comedy performances with quantitative and qualitative survey data to explore multilingual strategies in Indian stand-up comedy.

1. Research Design and Rationale

A convergent parallel design was chosen to allow simultaneous collection and analysis of discourse transcripts and audience survey responses. This enables triangulation: patterns observed in performance transcripts can be validated against audience perceptions, and vice versa.

2. Selection of Performances

Fifteen stand-up specials released between 2018 and 2024 were purposively sampled for diversity in language use, comedic style, and platform reach. Key criteria included:

- **Linguistic Variety:** Specials containing at least three distinct language varieties or significant Hinglish content.
- **Performers:** Established and emerging comedians (e.g., Vir Das, Zakir Khan, Kanan Gill, Aditi Mittal, Kenny Sebastian).
- **Platform:** Availability on major streaming or video-sharing platforms to ensure transcript accuracy.

Each special's length (30–60 minutes) supported extraction of approximately 20 minutes of core material—segments rich in language alternation and audience interaction.

3. Transcription and Coding Procedures

Using ELAN software, selected segments were transcribed verbatim, including disfluencies, laughter cues, and paralinguistic markers. Transcription conventions followed Jefferson (2004) standards for conversational analysis. A two-step coding process was employed:

1. **Identification:** Researchers flagged all instances of code-switching, defined as any transition between distinct languages or varieties.
2. **Classification:** Each instance was categorized per Muysken's (2000) typology—**insertion** (single-word borrowings), **alternation** (phrase- or clause-level switches), or **congruent lexicalization** (simultaneous mixing at multiple structural levels).

A second coder independently coded 20% of transcripts to establish inter-coder reliability (Cohen's $\kappa = .87$), indicating substantial agreement.

4. Survey Instrument Development

An online questionnaire was designed in Qualtrics with three sections:

- **Demographics:** Age, gender, education, primary/home language.
- **Closed-ended Items:** Five-point Likert scales measuring humor appreciation ("Mixed-language jokes are funnier than monolingual jokes"), authenticity perceptions, and comprehension ease.
- **Open-ended Prompts:** Respondents provided interpretations of two anonymized transcript excerpts illustrating insertion and alternation examples.

The survey underwent piloting with 20 respondents to refine wording, ensure clarity, and check completion time (avg. 8 minutes).

5. Sampling and Data Collection

Using convenience and snowball sampling via social media groups (e.g., comedy fan pages, university forums), 250 respondents were recruited. Inclusion criteria required respondents to have watched at least two of the selected specials. Data collection spanned four weeks in April–May 2025.

6. Data Analysis

- **Quantitative:** Likert-scale responses were analyzed in SPSS to compute frequencies, means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlations between code-switch frequency and humor/authenticity ratings.
- **Qualitative:** Open-ended responses underwent thematic analysis per Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-step process—familiarization, coding, theme development, reviewing themes, defining/naming themes, and producing the report.
- **Integration:** Discourse findings and survey results were merged via joint displays to illustrate how specific code-switch patterns align with audience interpretations.

This rigorous methodology ensures that both the structural properties of multilingual comedic discourse and its reception by diverse audiences are comprehensively captured and analyzed.

RESEARCH CONDUCTED AS A SURVEY

The survey component, administered to 250 self-selected comedy enthusiasts, provides an empirical window into audience perceptions of multilingual strategies in Indian stand-up. Below, key aspects of the survey design, respondent profile, and major findings are detailed.

1. Respondent Demographics

- **Age:** Respondents ranged from 18 to 45 years ($M = 26.8$, $SD = 5.4$).
- **Gender:** 55% male, 45% female.
- **Education:** 68% held a bachelor's degree, 24% a postgraduate degree, and 8% had completed secondary education.
- **Primary Language:** Hindi (40%), English (25%), Tamil (10%), Bengali (8%), Kannada (7%), other regional languages (10%).

This demographic spread reflects the urban-educated segment most likely to engage with stand-up content online.

2. Closed-Ended Item Findings

a. Humor Appreciation

- 82% of respondents "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" that mixed-language routines are funnier than monolingual ones ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.68$).
- Monolingual English performances scored lower, with only 48% rating them "Agree" or above.

b. Authenticity Perceptions

- 78% associated frequent vernacular use (Hindi or regional terms) with comedian authenticity ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.72$).
- English-heavy sets were perceived as less authentic by 60% of respondents, who felt they catered to elite or globalized tastes.

c. Comprehension Ease

- When code-switching involved common Hindi or English terms, 90% reported full comprehension ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.55$).
- Comprehension dropped to 65% ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.97$) when regional languages less familiar to respondents (e.g., Malayalam, Marathi) were used without explanatory context.

d. Preferred Balance

- 70% preferred a balanced mix (approx. 60% Hindi/English, 40% regional insertions) rather than extremes of monolingual or heavily regional content.

3. Thematic Analysis of Open-Ended Responses

Three primary themes emerged:

Theme 1: Identity Reflection

Respondents frequently noted that multilingual humor mirrored their everyday speech patterns:

“When he switches to Hindi mid-sentence, it feels like my own conversations with friends” (R#112). This theme underscores the role of code-switching in fostering personal and communal identification.

Theme 2: Social Commentary

Many pointed out that language shifts often cue socio-political jokes:

“He uses English to talk about corporate life, then hits with Hindi to poke fun at middle-class struggles” (R#87). Here, language choice functions as a framing device for critique.

Theme 3: Inclusion vs. Exclusion

While most appreciated multilingualism, a subset felt alienated:

“I didn’t get the joke when he used Punjabi; it felt exclusive” (R#43).

This theme highlights the tension between solidarity and potential exclusion when less-common regional varieties are deployed.

4. Correlational Insights

- A significant positive correlation ($r = .62, p < .01$) was observed between self-rated bilingual proficiency and higher humor ratings for alternation-based jokes.
- Authenticity ratings showed moderate correlation with frequency of insertional code-switching ($r = .54, p < .05$), indicating that even single-word borrowings influence perceived genuineness.

5. Limitations of the Survey Component

- **Sampling Bias:** Reliance on convenience sampling may over-represent highly engaged fans with stronger multilingual repertoires.
- **Self-Report:** Comprehension and authenticity judgments are subjective and may differ from actual cognitive processing.

Overall, the survey results corroborate discourse-analytic observations, demonstrating that multilingual strategies in Indian stand-up comedy are generally well-received—but require careful balancing to maximize both humor and accessibility.

RESULTS

Integrating discourse-analytic findings with survey data reveals a multifaceted picture of how multilingual strategies function in Indian stand-up comedy and how audiences respond.

1. Frequency and Distribution of Code-Switching

- **Insertion** (60% of instances): Single lexical borrowings—commonly cultural terms (“chai,” “aunty”), slang (“yaar,” “bindaas”), or English brand names (“Uber,” “Netflix”). These typically occurred for emphasis or comic effect.
- **Alternation** (40%): Larger structural switches, often used at punchline junctures (e.g., “So I told my boss in English, ‘You can’t micromanage me,’ and in Hindi I added, ‘main paise ke liye chain khoti nahin karti!’”).

Survey data confirm that insertional borrowings are broadly understood (90% comprehension), while alternational switches yield higher humor ratings among bilingual respondents ($M = 4.3$) than monolinguals ($M = 3.6$).

2. Pragmatic Functions and Comedic Effects

Emphasis & Incongruity

- English alternations often marked punchlines, leveraging the neutrality of English to heighten incongruity against a Hindi setup. Audience laughter peaks consistently aligned with these switches in performance transcripts.

Solidarity & In-Group Indexing

- Vernacular insertions fostered familiarity. For instance, Punjabi expletives triggered collective nostalgia among Punjabi-speaking respondents, who rated those segments as “highly relatable” ($M = 4.4$).

Framing & Structural Markers

- Code-switch points delineated narrative phases. In 80% of cases, a language shift signaled the transition from anecdotal setup to punchline delivery, as confirmed by audience laughter patterns.

Social Commentary

- Regional language shifts frequently prefaced socio-political jokes on topics like generational expectations, class mobility, or gender norms. Survey respondents noted that these segments felt “less threatening” and more palatable when couched in humor.

3. Paralinguistic Correlates

- **Intonation:** English punchlines exhibited rising-final contours, while Hindi punchlines used falling-final contours—a contrast that audience members cited as an “auditory cue” for joke climax.
- **Laughter Cues:** Transcript-coded laughter clusters co-occurred with 75% of alternational switches, suggesting a strong link between language shift and audience amusement.

4. Audience Comprehension and Engagement

- Respondents rated comprehension highest for common Hindi-English blends ($M = 4.35$) and lowest for unfamiliar regional insertions ($M = 3.25$).
- Engagement—measured via self-reported attentiveness and “likelihood to share” clips—was significantly higher ($t(249)=5.12, p<.001$) for mixed-language clips than for monolingual English or Hindi alone.

5. Thematic Synthesis of Qualitative Feedback

Three meta-themes emerged from open-ended survey responses:

1. **Reflective of Urban Lives:** Audiences saw multilingual jokes as mirror images of their hybrid linguistic environments.
2. **Safe Space for Critique:** Humor framed via language shifts facilitated discussion of sensitive social issues (e.g., dowry culture, workplace discrimination) under comedic guise.
3. **Balancing Act:** While most appreciated diversity, there was shared consensus that overuse of niche dialects without context risked exclusion.

CONCLUSION

This study illuminates the dynamic interplay between multilingual discourse strategies and audience reception in Indian stand-up comedy. Through a combined discourse-analytic and survey-based approach, we have demonstrated that code-switching—whether insertional borrowings, structural alternations, or congruent mixing—serves multiple pragmatic functions that amplify humor, foster solidarity, and enable nuanced social critique. Survey findings show broad audience appreciation for mixed-language performances, with 82% of respondents rating them funnier than monolingual sets and 78% perceiving higher authenticity when vernacular terms are used.

Theoretical Implications

By applying Muysken’s (2000) typology alongside Bourdieu’s (1991) concept of linguistic capital, the research situates stand-up comedy as a fertile site for sociolinguistic investigation. Language choices on stage are not random; they reflect and construct performers’ identities, negotiate audience expectations, and mediate cultural commentary. The identification of prosodic patterns—rising-final contours for English punchlines, falling-final for Hindi—and their alignment with audience laughter extends Conversation Analysis into performative contexts, offering a refined model for studying multimodal humor interaction.

Practical Applications

For comedians and production teams, the findings offer actionable guidelines:

- **Optimal Mixing Ratios:** Aim for approximately 60% Hindi/English blend with 40% region-specific insertions to sustain comprehension and relatability.
- **Clarity in Subtitling:** Platforms should provide contextual subtitles or brief on-screen glosses when regional dialects are used to safeguard accessibility.
- **Content Localization:** Regional specials can deepen engagement among specific language communities if accompanied by targeted marketing and localized promotional clips.

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