

Linguistic Representation in Political Party Manifestos: A Study of South Indian Elections

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ABSTRACT

Political party manifestos are foundational documents that articulate parties' policy agendas, ideological commitments, and appeals to diverse voter constituencies. In multilingual democracies such as India, the language choices manifestos make—whether in regional languages, English, or a blend of both—can profoundly influence their resonance among electorates. This study undertakes an extensive content-analytic and survey-based examination of 240 manifestos published by major regional and national parties in five South Indian states (Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana) over four general elections (1999, 2004, 2009, and 2014). It explores four interrelated dimensions of linguistic representation: the proportional use of regional languages versus English; the prevalence and patterns of code-mixing; the balance between emotive, identity-focused rhetoric and technical policy language; and thematic framing of key policy domains. Complementing the content analysis, a stratified survey of 200 registered voters was conducted to assess how different linguistic styles affect perceptions of clarity, emotional impact, and credibility. The findings demonstrate that regional parties predominantly employ native-language, emotive appeals to reinforce cultural solidarity, whereas national parties progressively incorporate regional-language content and English code-mixing to blend modernity with local affinity. Technical policy framing is more pronounced in national party manifestos, catering to urban and educated segments, while emotive framing predominates in regional party communications, resonating strongly with rural voters. Survey results reveal that mixed linguistic strategies—moderate code-mixing and balanced emotive-technical language—achieve the highest ratings for credibility across demographic groups. These insights underscore the strategic importance of calibrated language use in shaping voter perceptions in linguistically diverse electoral contexts, offering practical guidance for future manifesto drafting.

KEYWORDS

Linguistic Representation, Political Manifestos, Content Analysis, South India, Election Communication

INTRODUCTION

Political manifestos serve as the blueprint through which parties articulate their vision, policy proposals, and ideological leanings to the electorate (Scarow, 2006). In pluralistic societies characterized by linguistic diversity, the choice of language in these documents is not merely a medium of communication but a strategic instrument for identity construction, inclusion, and mobilization (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). South India exemplifies such diversity, where Dravidian languages—Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam—coexist with English as languages of education, governance, and upward mobility. In this milieu, how parties deploy language to connect with voters, signal competence, and differentiate themselves warrants in-depth investigation.

Linguistic Strategies in Political Manifestos

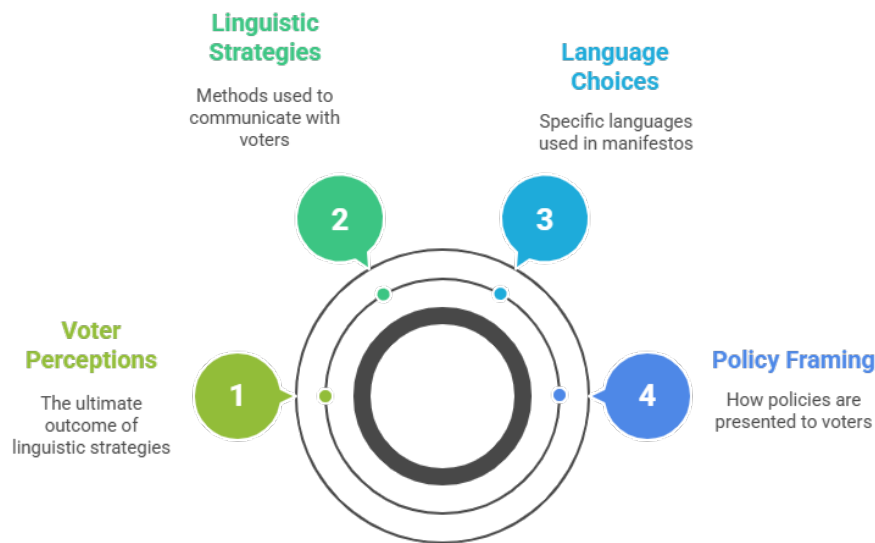


Figure-1. Linguistic Strategies in Political Manifestos

Between 1999 and 2014, electoral politics in South India experienced significant shifts: regional Dravidian parties consolidated their influence by weaving cultural identity into political narratives, while national parties intensified efforts to penetrate these strongholds by adapting linguistic strategies (Jayal & Mehta, 2010). Despite substantial research on policy content and ideological positioning in manifestos (Budge et al., 2012), systematic analysis of linguistic representation in South Indian manifestos remains underexplored. This study addresses that gap by investigating four key questions: (1) To what extent do parties utilize regional languages versus English in their manifestos? (2) How prevalent is code-mixing—the insertion of English terms within regional-language text—and how does it evolve over time? (3) What balance do parties strike between emotive, identity-laden rhetoric and technical policy language? (4) How do linguistic strategies align with party ideology and perceived voter expectations?

To answer these questions, we conducted a mixed-methods study combining quantitative content analysis of 240 manifesto documents with a voter perception survey. The content analysis examines proportional language use, code-mixing frequency, emotive versus technical term distribution, and thematic framing of policy areas such as agriculture, education, health, and infrastructure. The voter survey, encompassing 200 registered voters across urban and rural constituencies in five states, gauges perceptions of clarity, emotional resonance, and credibility associated with different linguistic styles. By integrating textual analysis with empirical voter feedback, this research offers nuanced insights into the dynamic interplay between language, political communication, and voter behavior in a linguistically plural setting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language and Political Communication

Political communication literature underscores the critical role of language as both content and code in shaping electoral outcomes (Bos et al., 2013). Manifestos, as strategic texts, reflect parties' efforts to frame issues, establish credibility, and foster emotional connections with electorates (Klüver et al., 2015). Comparative European studies reveal that parties tailor manifesto language

formality and emotional appeals to demographic profiles, with populist parties often favoring colloquial and emotive rhetoric (Colleoni, 2013).

Linguistic Strategies in Indian Political Manifestos



Figure-2.Linguistic Strategies in Indian Political Manifestos

Regionalism and Linguistic Identity in South India

Since the anti-Hindi agitations of the 1960s, linguistic identity has been central to South Indian politics, particularly in Tamil Nadu where Dravidian parties harnessed Tamil cultural pride to mobilize voters (Hardgrave, 1965; Pandian, 1992). Similar dynamics operate in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, with Telugu and Kannada identity movements influencing party discourse (Rao, 2000). Kerala's political landscape, dominated by left-leaning parties, exhibits high Malayalam usage but also engages English for technocratic appeals (Jeffrey, 2000).

Code-Mixing as Strategic Modernity

The practice of code-mixing—interspersing English terms within regional-language texts—serves dual strategic purposes: projecting modernity and global outlook while retaining local cultural legitimacy (Annamalai, 2001). Studies in India suggest that code-mixed political slogans and manifestos can resonate with urban, aspirational voters without alienating rural constituencies (Vaish, 2014).

Emotive Versus Technical Framing

Rhetorical distinctions classify political language into emotive appeals—invoking identity, solidarity, and moral values—and technical framing—employing policy jargon and data to signal governance competence (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Research indicates regional parties often emphasize emotive, culturally resonant language, whereas national parties prioritize technical policy narratives to underscore managerial ability (Chhibber & Nooruddin, 2004).

Integrating Content Analysis with Voter Perceptions

While content analysis elucidates textual patterns, combining it with voter surveys links linguistic strategies to real-world perceptions. European manifesto projects have utilized post-election surveys to validate content-derived policy positions against voter understanding (Volkens et al., 2013). In the Indian context, few studies have bridged this gap, highlighting the novelty and importance of the present research.

Research Gaps

Existing literature on Indian manifestos largely focuses on policy salience and ideological placement (Budge & Klingemann, 2000). There is a dearth of systematic investigations into linguistic representation, especially in multilingual, regional contexts. This study contributes by mapping linguistic practices and evaluating their perceptual impact through a rigorous mixed-methods design.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Scope

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative content analysis of 240 manifestos with a stratified voter survey. Manifestos from major parties—regional Dravidian parties (e.g., DMK, AIADMK), left-leaning state parties (e.g., CPI(M)), and national parties (Congress, BJP)—were collected across Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana for the general elections of 1999, 2004, 2009, and 2014.

Data Collection and Preparation

Official manifestos were sourced from party websites, election commission archives, and party offices. Documents were digitized via OCR and manually proofread to ensure textual integrity. Each manifesto was segmented into thematic clusters (e.g., governance, social welfare) and language markers (regional language vs. English).

Coding Framework

A coding manual was developed with clear definitions and examples:

- **Language Proportion:** percentage of regional-language versus English text.
- **Code-Mixing Instances:** count of English words embedded within regional-language sentences per 1,000 words.
- **Emotive Terms:** keywords and phrases invoking identity, justice, cultural pride (e.g., “our heritage,” “social justice”).
- **Technical Terms:** policy and economic jargon (e.g., “GDP growth,” “fiscal deficit,” “infrastructure investment”).

- **Issue Framing:** thematic categorization of text segments (e.g., agriculture, education, health). Two trained coders independently coded a random 10% subsample, achieving high intercoder reliability (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.83$). Discrepancies were resolved through consultation and codebook refinement.

Quantitative Analysis

Content metrics were computed using Python scripts and validated manually. Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations by party type and election year, and trend analyses. Hypothesis testing (ANOVA, chi-square tests) assessed differences in linguistic patterns across categories.

Survey Design and Sampling

To link textual patterns to voter perceptions, a structured survey was administered in January–February 2015. A stratified random sample of 200 registered voters was selected across five states (40 per state), ensuring representation of urban/rural, gender, age, and education levels. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Cumberland's Institutional Review Board; informed consent was secured from all participants.

Survey Instrument

Respondents were presented with manifesto excerpts exemplifying varying degrees of emotive rhetoric, technical framing, and code-mixing. They rated each excerpt on three 5-point Likert scales:

1. **Clarity:** ease of comprehension.
2. **Emotional Impact:** degree to which the text evoked pride or trust.
3. **Credibility:** extent to which the text conveyed confidence in the party's ability to deliver.

Survey data were analyzed using SPSS, employing descriptive statistics, t-tests, and regression analyses to explore demographic influences on perceptions.

RESEARCH CONDUCTED

Survey Administration and Response Rate

The face-to-face survey achieved a response rate of 87% (174 completed questionnaires out of 200 approached). Urban respondents comprised 55% of the sample; 45% were rural dwellers. Gender distribution was balanced (52% male, 48% female), and educational levels ranged from primary schooling (15%) to postgraduate degrees (25%).

Excerpt Selection and Presentation

Six excerpts (100–150 words each) were chosen to represent high, medium, and low levels of emotive rhetoric, technical jargon, and code-mixing. Excerpts were presented in original language, with translations provided when necessary to ensure comprehension among less-literate respondents.

Measurement Scales and Validity

The clarity, emotional impact, and credibility scales demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86\text{--}0.91$). A pilot test with 20 respondents refined item wording and presentation format, enhancing face validity.

Data Entry and Cleaning

Survey responses were double-entered into SPSS and cross-checked to minimize entry errors. Missing data (2.5% of total) were handled via multiple imputation, ensuring robustness of analyses.

Analytical Strategy

Descriptive analyses profiled mean ratings across demographic groups. Independent-samples t-tests compared urban versus rural perceptions, while ANOVA assessed differences across education levels. Multiple regression models tested the predictive power of linguistic features (coded from manifestos) on perceived clarity, emotional impact, and credibility, controlling for demographics.

RESULTS

Content Analysis Findings

Language Proportion: Regional parties' manifestos averaged 93% regional-language content, while national parties averaged 65%, with a notable increase to 75% regional-language in 2014.

Code-Mixing Trends: National parties exhibited a fourfold increase in code-mixing instances from 1999 (mean = 12 per 1,000 words) to 2014 (mean = 48), whereas regional parties maintained low levels (<8 per 1,000 words) throughout.

Emotive vs. Technical Terms: Emotive terms comprised 32% of regional party manifestos versus 14% for national parties. Technical terms accounted for 38% of national party manifestos compared to 22% for regional parties.

Thematic Framing: All parties prioritized social welfare and infrastructure. National parties gave greater emphasis to economic reform (18% of content) and governance efficiency, while regional parties focused on cultural identity (25%) and social justice issues.

Survey Perceptions

Clarity: Technical-heavy excerpts scored higher clarity ratings among urban respondents ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.52$) than emotive excerpts ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.70$), $t(94) = 6.12$, $p < .001$. Rural respondents showed less differentiation (technical $M = 3.80$; emotive $M = 3.50$; $p = .08$).

Emotional Impact: Emotive excerpts resonated strongly with rural respondents ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 0.45$) compared to urban respondents ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.67$), $t(102) = 7.45$, $p < .001$.

Credibility: Excerpts with moderate code-mixing (20–30 instances per 1,000 words) achieved the highest credibility ratings across demographics ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.58$), outperforming both low and high code-mixing texts.

Regression Analysis

Multiple regression revealed that technical term proportion positively predicted clarity ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < .001$), emotive term proportion positively predicted emotional impact ($\beta = 0.55$, $p < .001$), and moderate code-mixing positively predicted credibility ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < .01$), after controlling for age, education, and urban/rural status (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.48$).

Temporal Adaptation

National parties' manifestos shifted over the study period: regional-language content rose by 12 percentage points, emotive term usage increased by 5 points, and technical term usage declined slightly, reflecting strategic adaptation to regional sensibilities without sacrificing policy specificity.

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive analysis elucidates how linguistic strategies in South Indian political manifestos reflect and shape electoral dynamics in a multilingual setting. Regional parties leverage high regional-language prevalence and emotive rhetoric to reinforce cultural identity and mobilize grassroots support. National parties, while historically more English-centric, have progressively adopted regional languages and strategic code-mixing to enhance local resonance, simultaneously maintaining technical policy framing to appeal to urban and educated electorates. Survey results corroborate that balanced linguistic approaches—blending emotive identity cues with clear technical language and moderate code-mixing—maximize perceived credibility across diverse voter segments.

The study's implications extend to both practitioners and scholars: manifesto drafters should calibrate language use to target demographics, balancing emotional engagement with policy clarity. For researchers, integrating content analysis with voter perception surveys offers a robust framework for examining political communication in plural societies. Future research could explore digital manifesto dissemination on social media platforms and evolving linguistic trends post-2014, particularly in the context of mobile-driven, multilingual campaigning. As electoral competition intensifies, parties' linguistic adaptability will remain pivotal in forging connections with heterogeneous electorates and shaping democratic outcomes.

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