**English Vinglish and the Logic of Globalization**

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**Introduction**

In his survey of the global landscape in the wake of the Second World War, the German philologist and literary critic Erich Auerbach (2014, 253) notes, “[o]ur planet, the Earth […] is growing smaller and smaller and becoming less diverse […] Today we are witnessing a homogenization of human life the world over”. Auerbach—who had fled the violence of the Third Reich, first to Istanbul before making his way to Yale University—implies that the deliberate erasure of cultural difference did not end with the fall of Nazi Germany, but is an ongoing process, one integral to the structure of globalization. According to Auerbach, the world is undergoing a massive restructuring, as the currents of globalization exchanged cultural pluralism for uniformity. Due to asymmetrical power dynamics, hegemonic nations displace less powerful communities and traditions, and coercively institute their own social orders. Far from bringing cultures into enriching contact with one another, Auerbach suggests the mechanics of globalization are balanced upon practices of violence and imperialism. Articulating a futile nostalgia for an irrecoverable and quite frankly romanticized world, one where cross-cultural intersections were mutually generative rather than unilaterally destructive, Auerbach’s essay ultimately takes on a pessimistic tenor, and he never appears to resolve his anxieties about the inescapable simplification of the world. He regards the loss of cultural multiplicity as an inevitable and regrettable social fact.

The anxieties Auerbach voices are given rich expression in the 2012 Bollywood film, *English Vinglish*. Directed and written by Gauri Shinde, *English Vinglish* offers an updated account of how globalization looks in the 21st century, with particular reference to the place of Indian culture in a globalized world. Put differently, the film thematizes a number of the tensions and concerns engendered by the ideological dissolution of the nation-state in favour of a global polity. While Auerbach envisages himself as standing at the incipient stages of modernity’s teleology, which has only begun its large-scale homogenization of global life, Shinde’s later film confirms the prescience of this vision, and represents a world that has been broadly—though not yet wholly—globalized. A critical difference, however, hinges on how Shinde refuses Auerbach’s pessimism. Although Shinde represents how local ideologies and languages have been largely marginalized, she also brings into view the fecund possibilities that
might subsist within a globalized world. This is demonstrated through the narrative trajectory of the film’s protagonist Shashi Godbole, played by Sridevi. A housewife in Pune, Shashi feels alienated from her own family due to her inability to speak English. The film tracks her visit to New York, where she goes to help organize the upcoming wedding of her niece. When there, she enrols in a month-long English course, where she encounters a range of people, from distinct cultural backgrounds, who undertake their English education for similar reasons. The film closes with Shashi successfully learning English, an act that finally furnishes her with the respect long denied to her by members of her family.

As this brief summary makes clear, the film is faithfully concerned with the fraught implications of English’s status as a global language. More specifically, it explores how access to English education is organized along lines of gender, class, and geography. To be denied access to the world’s lingua franca is to stand somewhat in the social periphery, even within a community that has not historically spoken English. Learning English, however, as Shashi successfully does, is the ticket to the most basic of human demands, such as the affordance of respect from one’s family. This essay briefly traces the history of English in India, before attending to the film. I argue that although English Vinglish, with a kind of blunt pragmatism, expresses the importance of English education, it also indicates how its status as a lingua franca is fraught with gendered, economic, and more broadly neo-colonial dimensions. Opposed to supinely accepting the prominence that is internationally granted to English, the film wrestles with the often violent but occasionally productive politics attendant to the language’s pre-eminent position within a globalized world.

How Did We Get Here?

English first properly disembarked on Indian shores in 1608, when the East India Company established their first base in South Asia, in the port of Surat (Chaudhuri 1999, 45). At the time, India was under the rule of the Mughal Empire, and was already a zone marked by uncommon language diversity, primarily due to the essentially artificial configuration of the nation: India was less a cohesive and homogenous entity than it was a bundle of distinct regional cultures, traditions, and languages (Kulke and Rothermund 1998, 103–52). In these early years, the relationship between India and English was established unsystematically, connected mostly to the trade routes in addition to some cultural mixing, the latter of which was relatively limited due to the British policy of indirect rule over their colony (Krishnaswamy and Krishnaswamy 2006, 7–20). Over the course of the 18th century, the East India Company’s control over India gradually expanded, and it no longer concerned itself, as it initially had, strictly with the business of commerce (Robins 2012; Roy 2016). Instead, it began to entrench its presence in the nation by infiltrating all aspects of the cultural arena, an ambition that was partially undertaken through the installation of an imperial system of education. The primary architect behind this project was Lord Thomas Macaulay, who drafted a policy for wiping out India’s traditional cultures by means of a Western system of education. An education in English stood at the center of Macaulay’s plan for strengthening the grip of British Empire around one of its most precious colonies. He wrote, “[t]he claims of our own language is hardly necessary to recapitulate. It stands pre-eminent” (Macaulay 2004, 231). None too sentimental about the culture he was intent
on eradicating, Macaulay primarily framed his educational agenda as integral to a larger narrative of global progress and modernity. “We are not content,” he noted, “to leave the natives to the influence of their own hereditary prejudices” (235). Macaulay was also candid about the engine of imperialism that drove his pedagogical mission, and named the practical function of establishing “a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern: a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (237). This group of educated Indians was not intended to be merely facilitative between the empire and its subjects, but was also responsible for further dispersing the educational precepts of the British Empire. Reflecting on the success of Macaulay’s program, Mohandas K. Gandhi (1909, 61) later remarked, “To give millions a knowledge of English is to enslave them. The foundation that Macaulay laid of education has enslaved us.” From the beginning, the story of English in India is indistinct from a narrative of colonialism and exploitation.

This imperial history, however, does not wholly structure the language’s presence in India, especially following the achievement of independence in 1947. The Constitution of India names English, alongside Hindi, as the official language of the national government. Given India’s sheer linguistic diversity — the Constitution lists twenty-two official languages — this turn to English represents the need for a language that transgressed geographical boundaries, and could allow the government to function as an integrated unit (Agrawal 2014, 7–8). Complementing this position, India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, conceptualized the language as facilitating a necessary link to the broader global horizon, and once remarked “English is our major window into the modern world” (as cited in Elizabeth 2010, 32). In both instances, English’s sustained presence occurred under the sign of political pragmatism. Retaining the language marked an attempt to press an oppressive legacy into the services of a renewed and free India. Although, as Dan Ellens and Lakshmi Srnivas (2006, 121) note, many Indians viewed the continued emphasis on English as a retention of an imperial structure, there was a competing anxiety that to leave English behind altogether would be incongruous with the realities of both a diverse nation and a globalized world. To opt out of English in toto would be ruinously impractical. This tension between English and traditional languages was renewed during the liberalization of the Indian markets in 1991, a procedure that signaled India’s full-fledged leap into the terrain of global capitalism (Nayyar 1996). As the Indian economy became “increasingly unregulated and internationalized,” the importance of “English language proficiency” was “seen in pragmatic terms” (Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase 2009, 38). The liberalization of the markets set the stage for a number of linguistic struggles, as battles were fought in favour of raising the status of traditional languages such as Bengali or Hindi, but the “hegemony of English” persisted due to the stubborn fact that it was the port of access to “the fruits of a globalizing India” (38). Although, as Auerbach reminds us, the structures responsible for facilitating this erosion of cultural borders are often violent, and even neo-colonial, there nevertheless remain real social advantages that arise from adjusting to these processes of globalization.

It is not just people who adjust: Bollywood, India’s Hindi film industry, is similarly responsive to the shaping pressures of globalization (Rai 2009; Mehta and Pandharipande 2011; Schaefer and Karan 2013). The determinations of globalization have been transformative,
reverberating through “industry practices, state policy, new media technology, sites and modes of consumption, and networks and forms of sociality that criss-cross regional, national, and transnational boundaries and affiliations” (Kavoori and Punatheambekar 2008, 1–2). Virtually no aspect of the industry was left untouched, including the regularity with which English is deployed in films. Alongside television programs and advertisements, “Bollywood,” writes Rohini Mokashi-Punekar (2011, 128), “made Hinglish the swinging lingo of the Indian market”. Although Bollywood is essentially Hindi cinema, English is also an industrial fixture. Literature on the subject remains, however, sparse, according to Viniti Vaish (2011, 29). An important exception is Aung Li’s lexical examination of Bollywood films from the 1990s to the 2000s. Li (2010, 403) reports that film scripts deployed English with increasing frequency over the course of three decades, a linguistic shift that he suggests is an effect of screenwriters deliberately attempting to reproduce real-world speech patterns. This increasing deployment of code switching, Li notes, does not represent the homogenous march of English towards the status of a universal language, but is inflected by “variables such as age and socioeconomic status” (405). Despite its historical enshrinement within India’s pedagogical practices and legal institutions, the effects of these teachings have not been distributed evenly. Class, as Chaise LaDousa (2014, 15) writes, is a particularly relevant factor, as “[a]n education in English has emerged as a defining feature of a new Indian middle class.” Gender also plays an integral function in determining language practices, as Indian women are regularly excluded from an English education (Klenk 2010; Kumar 2011). Thus, although Bollywood captures changing sociolinguistic realities, its representational practices are themselves ideologically bounded. The industry’s trend of depicting increased amounts of code switching between English and Hindi accurately depicts only a portion of the Indian population. As English Vinglish makes readily apparent, a knowledge of English is structured along specifically gendered and class biases.

Adding an additional layer of linguistic intrigue to English Vinglish is its use of Hindi, which has been described as Bollywood’s “matrix language” (Vaish 2011, 28). This is despite the fact that the film is set in Marathi-speaking Pune, and loosely based upon the filmmaker’s Marathi-speaking mother (Gupta 2014). Addressing this dissonance between her film and reality, Shinde explained that she drafted the film with Sridevi in mind as playing the leading role, and asserted that Marathi would have sounded “unnatural” coming from the actress’s mouth (Loksatta Live 2012, 1:31). Shinde phrases her rationale as primarily related to casting, and leaves unspoken, for instance, the possible commercial factors that might have influenced her decision, such as the larger share of the market held by Bollywood as compared to the Marathi film industry (Biswal 2017, 1–2). Most interesting, for my purposes, is how she intimates that India’s local languages are essentially fungible, an implication that underscores how English Vinglish is predominantly concerned with the function of English within the nation’s sociolinguistic landscape. Demonstrating the force of this implication, the film would, the same year, be partially reshot in Tamil, with much of the same cast. The equations are clear: within the film’s expressive design, Marathi, Hindi, and Tamil are interchangeable, but English remains a constant variable. Following the clues Shinde leaves, I would suggest that the competing languages of the film, English and Hindi, are not to be taken as literal representations of India’s linguistic reality. Instead, they serve as tools of inquiry into the practical effects of English’s status as the dominant language within a globalized world.
Domestic Tension: English as Ostracizing

Released twenty-one years after the liberalization of the markets, *English Vinglish* captures the ubiquitous but nevertheless unevenly distributed presence of English in India. Crystallizing the tensions produced by globalization, it depicts an uneasy co-existence between English and Hindi in a middle-class, urban home in Pune. From the start, the film foregrounds the personal difficulties that arise from Shashi’s inability to speak English, a language in which her husband is perfectly fluent. Illustrating how education in English has historically been highly gendered, Shashi’s linguistic shortcoming aligns her with her elderly mother-in-law. The film suggests, however, that women of the new generation have access to the educational resources that have conventionally been the privilege of males, and the daughter of the household, Sapna, is quite comfortable with English, and is in fact embarrassed by her mother’s incapacity to even understand the language. Though the young son of the family, Sagar, does not take issue with his mother being a monoglot, the overall effect is that Shashi feels alienated within her own household. She is estranged from the discourse within which her husband and children are immersed on a daily basis.

Shashi’s sense of isolation is deepened by her daughter’s casual cruelty. For example, Sapna mocks her mother’s inability to pronounce a word like “jazz,” which becomes “ʤɔz” (jhaaz) when spoken by Shashi (4:29). The intergenerational rift climaxes in the wake of a visit with Sapna’s teacher at her English-medium school. To the great disappointment of her daughter, Shashi goes in lieu of her husband, who is called away by work. The exchange is profoundly unfair: the two languages, from Sapna’s vantage, do not share in the same social value. Acutely embarrassed, Sapna takes special care to ensure that her mother does not communicate with her friend’s parents. She becomes particularly infuriated when, during the parent-teacher meeting, Shashi admits that she cannot speak English, a confession that leads to the teacher cheerfully making an effort to communicate with the mother in rusty Hindi. The incident horrifies Sapna, who feels that she risks contamination by simply being associated with her mother’s educational impoverishment. There is an implicit suggestion that she would rather her mother stay at home. In this case, domestic confinement serves as a kind of quarantine that can keep Shashi’s English-speaking family members free of shame. However, even in the confines of the home Shashi is vulnerable to disrespect, as she is subject to her daughter’s biting appraisals of her constant mispronunciations and general ignorance of English literature.

The uneven acquisition of English leads not only to intergenerational strain, but also has an effect on Shashi’s marriage. Reflecting on the parent-teacher conference, and the humiliation she brought upon her daughter, Shashi brings her concerns to her husband’s attention that evening. “I have embarrassed her,” she remarks to her husband, Satish (17:33). Shashi feels distraught, and questions his reasons for marrying a woman such as herself, incapable of speaking English:

Shashi: Tell me, why did you marry me?
Satish: What can I say... one look at you and I was hooked! Isn’t there any water?
Shashi: Why didn’t you marry a modern woman? (17:43–53)
Given the narrative trajectory, it is clear that Shashi’s concerns about not being a “modern woman” are fuelled by her incapacity to toggle between Hindi and English, a failure which inscribes upon her a kind of backwardness and provincialism. She unknowingly reproduces the same logic that Macaulay had earlier advanced in his insistence upon the essential binds between modernity and English. Having imbibed the governing discourses that have determined Hindi to be an archaic language, Shashi feels a temporal snag between herself and much of the society around her, including the one inhabited by her husband and daughter. Satish’s response does little to address the pain his wife feels: instead, his dismissiveness—which carries heavy patriarchal tones, as he emphasizes her looks and service—suggests he is happy for his wife to live within a pre-modern temporality, as it would keep her sealed within the realm of domesticity, ornamenting the same home that she looks after. Both daughter and husband prefer for Shashi to remain at home, albeit for different reasons.

The conversation between Shashi and Satish is expressive of an ideological split that lies at the heart of contemporary India. There is friction between, on the one hand, the traditional, Hindi-speaking, sari-wearing Shashi and, on the other, the modern, English-speaking, short skirt-wearing Sapna and the suit-wearing Satish. Shashi’s concern about not being “modern”, so casually dismissed by her husband, evinces a real anxiety over the incompatibility between the traditions of India and the broader globalized world. Although it is obvious that there are those—like Satish and Sapna—who can speak both English and Hindi, the prevailing ideologies that support, transmit, and arrange modern life staunchly privilege English over all other languages.

**English as the Language of Global Capitalism**

Engaging the cultural dynamics responsible for the tensions that saturate the Godbole household, *English Vinglish* suggests that the system of values that accords English an eminent status within a multilingual world is an effect of global capitalism. Without dilating upon the historical causes responsible for this current state of affairs, the film nevertheless makes clear that, within the 21st century, English is inextricably knotted with the world of commerce. Shashi’s business—a small but vibrant catering business run out of her home, and patronized by fellow Hindi speakers—is deemed illegitimate by her husband, who casually remarks, “Only I should eat your food. Why should others enjoy it?” (9:46–49). The patriarchy that programs Satish’s possessiveness over the results of his wife’s craft speaks for itself. Most interesting is how Shashi divines in his phrase a related but separate meaning, one connected to her incapacity to speak English. “Oh, I forget,” she remarks soon after, in response to her husband’s reference to the business meetings that keep him out of the home, “‘important talks’ happen only in English” (10:26–36). Shashi implies that Satish’s wish to be the sole beneficiary of his wife’s cooking is partially an effect of his well-established belief that real business happens in English. A business that is anchored to one’s local language, irrespective of the personal inclinations of the proprietor, is perceived as so bounded as to be irrelevant. Language facility operates as a site of patriarchal articulation not only in Shashi having been denied an English education as a child, unlike the similarly aged Satish, but also insofar as her own business is bluntly delegitimized by her husband. Her catering company is insignificant not simply because
she is a woman whose productive labour, according to Satish, should be the exclusive property of her husband, but also because she does not conduct her trade within the official language of commerce. Thus, *English Vinglish* shows how one’s language incapacity can easily be transformed into a resource for enforcing repressive gender norms. Yet, if we follow Satish’s logic, we might see English education as a prerequisite for passing through the gates of domesticity, into the esteemed world of business. In this connection, there is a pragmatic resonance to Sapna’s English-medium education, irrespective of the cutting ways she mobilizes it against her mother. If it suggests a buckling to the pressure of globalization, which slowly but surely marginalizes other languages, it also points towards the necessity of acquiring English to become a fully formed agent in the world of global capitalism, a world from which Shashi is pointedly excluded.

The intersecting generational and patriarchal logic that keeps Shashi trapped within Hindi is relaxed when, ahead of her family, she travels to New York City. She initially feels disoriented, lost amidst a culture she cannot understand. Finding herself with extra time on her hands, and desperately wanting to feel more grounded amidst her new cultural circumstances, Shashi secretly enrolls in a month-long English class. She finds immediate relief in the English language, which affords her the respect and dignity she is so regularly denied within her own home in India. This is exemplified during her first class. The film, continuing its treatment of the deep connections between English and commerce, depicts Shashi hesitantly introducing herself to her class as a small business owner. “Small business... in house only,” she stumbles, “making snacks” (54:57–55:01). Eagerly seizing upon Shashi’s halting remarks, the teacher names her an “entrepreneur”, a term that, for Shashi, immediately imbues her trade with a profound respect and significance that was previously denied to her (55:15). The acquisition of the word is implicitly contrasted with her dismissive husband, and the viewer sees that learning English can be empowering. The film does not, I rush to clarify, validate Lord Macaulay’s image of English as an exalted language due to its intrinsic superiority. English’s positive charge within the scene is entangled with the particularities of Shashi’s life: it is of central relevance that she learns the term “entrepreneur” in New York, when separated by a mass of ocean and land from the domestic sphere within which her husband and daughter would otherwise conceal her.

Rather than articulating a neo-colonial privileging of English, the film more pragmatically gestures towards how the language can produce rich and emancipatory possibilities within a specific biographical framework. The word offers Shashi an alternative frame for understanding and expressing herself. Furthermore, although the moment appears to buttress the notion that English is the official language of commerce, the very shape of the word “entrepreneur”—with its Francophone inflection—is a reminder, to the viewer if not to Shashi herself, of the messy histories that inflect our modern languages. The politics of language are complex: there is no such thing as a pure English, or a pure Hindi. Most significantly, the scene points towards how the empowerment that learning a new dialect can generate, particularly in the climate of global capitalism, is real, and not easily discountable. In the shadow of post-structuralism there is a tendency to view language suspiciously, as an act of violence that insistently hierarchizes,
devalues, and others. *English Vinglish* registers this perspective through the depiction of the Godbole household, but also indicates English’s capacity to instil dignity and self-respect.

Alongside its treatment of the logic that binds gender, geography, capitalism, and English, the film offers a similar consideration of how English education runs along class lines within a male demography. This conceit is articulated in the comic interaction witnessed by Shashi at the airport, between her unnamed fellow traveller, played by the charismatic Amitabh Bachchan, and a United States customs agent. When asked the purpose of his visit to America, Bachchan slyly remarks, “To help the United States of America... You know, spend some dollars, help recover your economy” (32:46–32:53). The film, coming a mere four years after the financial crisis of 2008 sent the United States lurching into a state of economic instability, implicitly gestures towards the emergence of new world powers that can challenge the country’s hegemony. Although the scene is implicitly framed by the imperial processes that led to the eminent status of English, Bachchan complicates the logic that power moves unidirectionally by suggesting that the acquisition of English amongst non-native speakers permits the unprecedented accretion of economic and political power. Bachchan’s somewhat flippant remark is inseparable from his command of English: his ability to participate in the transnational economy is established upon the calm comfort he exudes in the language. The film pragmatically accepts that the world privileges English and, instead of alluding to a program of decolonization wherein the global *lingua franca* is rejected in favour of traditions that are themselves marred by forms of injustice, *English Vinglish* gestures towards how acquiring English need not manifest as meek acquiescence to a neo-colonial regime. Bachchan’s dialogue, which casts India in a position of power over America, suggests that participating in a linguistic hierarchy does not necessarily signify submission. Far from being wholly shaped by the currents of globalization, one might also in turn participate in the redirection of those same currents.

It is readily apparent that Bachchan’s character—who travels first class, has a taste for red wine, and an assured command of English—comes from a position of privilege. He stands in pointed contrast to Ramamurthy, a classmate of Shashi’s, who articulates a contradistinctive status and experience within the framework of global capitalism. Ramamurthy’s lack of polish, his heavy accent, and his craving for his mother’s idli, all suggest that he has arrived from a markedly different economic background. Characterized along lines that are strikingly similar to Shashi—who is denied respect by her husband and daughter—Ramamurthy’s impetus for learning the language is so that he might exact a sort of vengeance upon his co-workers who mock his broken English:

My... my deepest feeling... is to teach them such a lesson... such a lesson... such a lesson!... Oh sorry... I want to teach the office peoples big lesson... They're thinking... no... he's a idiot... only knowing the software. Making fun of my behind... of my English! But now I will show them that Ramamurthy is Mr. Ramamurthy! I will show them what I can do! (1:20:40–1:21:19)

While Ramamurthy’s exuberant desire for revenge, coupled with the sheer force of his verbal outpouring, imbues his monologue with a comic overtone, the comedy does not mitigate the
harshness of the work environment he describes. Though it is understandable why Ramamurthy’s clumsy language skills alienate him from his American co-workers, the film gestures towards the cruelty of singularly privileging English, as knowing the language becomes the chief way of earning basic respect. According to the logic that underwrites his co-workers’ cutting jibes, Ramamurthy can be dismissed as an “idiot” irrespective of the merit of his work or the content of his character. In expressing that retribution motivates Ramamurthy, as opposed to the aspiration to interact with or befriend his coworkers, English Vinglish gestures towards the damaging effects of the established linguistic hierarchy. Although a character such as Bachchan’s can comfortably traverse international spaces, one’s capacity to access the range of political and economic possibilities opened up by globalization hinges upon the cultural and economic capital that engender a competency in English. For those like Ramamurthy—educated, though not in English—the failure to speak fluent English bars access to even a modicum of respect from one’s peers. Even as the globalized world enables access to transnational resources of power, there is also class stratification at play: one’s place in the social hierarchy determines how much English one knows, and how much respect one is subsequently afforded. English is not universally accessible in India: Shashi and Ramamurthy show it is shot through with gendered and class implications.

**English Facilitated Solidarity**

Having lingered on the intersection of English with business, I now turn to how English is treated outside of the corporate world. Globalization has led not only to the unrestrained flow of capital, but has also engendered increasingly porous borders, loosening the geographic constraints and challenging conventional understandings of what constitutes identity. In a global world, people circulate internationally, and through its status as a global language, English serves as a common tongue, transgressing borders and uniting those who would otherwise be unlikely to communicate. The obvious example of the lines of solidarity that are enabled by English is the class that Shashi takes, which includes an American instructor, a Mexican nanny, an Indian cab driver, a Chinese hair stylist, an Indian software engineer, a French chef, and an African man of unknown occupation. Shashi befriends the various characters, all of whom are united in their eagerness to learn English, which has transcended class and geographical lines and connected people who, we would imagine, would otherwise remain disengaged from one another. These friendships, forged within the fires of globalization, are shown to be genuine, enriching, and relatively uncomplicated. Moreover, the film assiduously declines to offer a full engagement with the realities of immigrant lives, which are so vulnerable to discrimination (Portes and Rumbaut, 2006). Amongst the range of characters that make up the classroom, Ramamurthy’s experience with his co-workers seems exceptional, rather than normative. The bonds established within the classroom can easily extend outward, facilitated by the skills learned in the same space. As Nico Slate (2019, 259) writes, *English Vinglish* “portrays America as an international crossroads defined by diversity, variety, and equality.” These three notions are made possible by English acquisition. Though the language’s modern-day primacy has been formed within a colonial and capitalist nexus, its function is
irreducible to such mechanisms. It has the genuine capacity to foster transnational and transracial relations.

English’s capacity to bridge cultures is expressed in the incident that gives the film its narrative thrust: an interracial marriage. Such an event embodies the possible fruitfulness of dissolving boundaries and the possibility for bringing different cultures into productive contact. Shashi’s niece Meera is set to wed Kevin, a union facilitated by their sharing a common language. Kevin does not speak Hindi, but he evinces a willingness to learn about Indian traditions, and even clumsily attempts a traditional dance following the instructions of his fiancée. Although English is ultimately the prevailing language, it is demonstrated to have the facility to express, as opposed to occlude, aspects of other cultures. One does not need to resort to translation theory to understand that an English rendering of an Indian tradition is not the same as it would be if expressed in Hindi, but it is a close enough approximation to ensure that the less powerful culture is not entirely effaced. Meera and Kevin, living in New York and speaking English, suggest that Indian customs do not need to be sacrificed at the altar of Western culture. On the contrary, English itself is an adequate medium for bringing Meera’s traditional culture into the folds of her American life.

While the very narrative core that stands at the center of English Vinglish suggests a certain compatibility between English and Hindi, the scene that concludes the representation of the marriage between Meera and Kevin—Shashi’s wedding speech—is ambivalent insofar as it seems to buy in to the logic in which English is a legitimate determinant of how much respect one deserves. Shashi delivers her speech in English, expressing the virtues of marriage, and the comfort of being in a family that thrives on love and unity. The speech shames her daughter and husband, the latter becoming especially regretful of his condescending treatment of his wife. In some ways, Shashi achieves what Rama had yearned for—respect via linguistic mastery. There are delicate shades of vengeance insofar as she inspires remorse amongst those family members who mistreated her. Following her speech, the strained relationship between Shashi and her husband that had existed throughout the film dissipates within an air of romanticism. Thus, the scene perpetuates the reigning system of values, in which proficiency in English qualifies one for respect. This has some axiomatically pernicious resonances in a film that has registered a good deal of trepidation in regard to the eminence of English within Indian culture. The speech supports the idea that learning the globe’s lingua franca is required to obtain dignity, even from one’s own family. Yet there is no denying the effectiveness of Shashi’s speech, which thematically and formally allows a family to fortify their intimate bonds. Once again, the film bluntly recognizes global linguistic realities while simultaneously directing the viewer’s attention to the practical possibilities that inhere within English acquisition.

This seeming embrace of English as having the unassailable status of the most legitimate and prestigious language is memorably complicated in the film’s closing scene. Aboard the plane, at the beginning of the long journey from New York City back to Pune, Shashi declines the flight attendant’s offer of English reading material, and instead asks, “do you have any Hindi newspaper?” (2:10:25). This is an admittedly small site of resistance, one which stands against the widespread privileging of English, but it importantly suggests that a knowledge of English need not completely dislodge the Hindi language, and the Indian identity with which it is so intimately coiled. Instead, one can strive towards establishing a balance between the two
cultures. The point is critical: Shashi learns English but chooses Hindi. It is not, the film suggests, the choice everyone will make—the power dynamics preclude the two languages from existing on an even ground—but the hope English Vinglish inscribes is that there need not be the supplanting of one by another. One might enjoy the benefits of knowing English without wholly subscribing to its privileged status. In fact, English itself can be utilized to assert one’s preference for Hindi.

Without diminishing the recurrent problems that underwrite English’s privileged status, I would suggest that through the closing scene, alongside the characterization of Shashi’s diverse class and the interracial marriage, the film evinces a cosmopolitan élan. Randolph Bourne, the fin de siècle social theorist, writes that America’s vitality emerged from the “threads of living and potent cultures, blindly striving to weave themselves into a novel international nation” (Bourne 1916, 94). Despite profound anxieties, English Vinglish ultimately aligns with this project: the film’s vision entails building global solidarity and tapping into the futures made possible by English without letting go of tradition. It does, however, pragmatically recognize the difficulty of this feat. The viewer’s negative response to the environment of the Godbole household at the film’s beginning is derived from how the family has mindlessly purchased into the prestige of English. Neither Satish nor Sapna properly recognize how English’s privileged status has been assembled within the grips of colonialism, and contemporaneously produces lines of gender and class inequities. The film’s final sounding note, where Shashi expresses a union between two parts of her identity, reads as the healthiest attitude to hold within a globalized world. English Vinglish expresses the possibility of pluralism even amidst starkly uneven configurations of power.

Erich Auerbach would likely be heartened by English Vinglish’s articulation of the possibility of retaining a local identity while still being a citizen of a globalized world. Although the film recurrently gestures towards the difficulty of holding onto one’s traditional culture, the central character, Shashi, is so endearing precisely because she manages to establish the kind of balance that her husband and daughter have failed to achieve. There are, to be sure, justifiable critiques that may be lodged against the film for its concluding acceptance of English as a lingua franca, a gesture that risks underwriting a modernized version of Macaulay’s imperial agenda. Such a critique would, however, miss the pragmatic orientation of the film, which sees, as Auerbach had, that globalization is inevitable, and irreversible. In order to participate in the increasingly homogenous world, one must acquire English. The film does not romanticize this reality, but neither does it uncritically lionize the traditional cultures being increasingly pushed to the social periphery. Instead, it holds the hope that one might allow aspects of the local and the global to mingle and revise one another. Tentatively, the film suggests that bilingualism might hold certain keys to ensuring that the world remains multilingual and diverse, rather than sliding into the banal uniformity that Auerbach derided. English can be deployed to productively participate in the global community—a notion that the film suggests is not restricted to the international economy—but one might also remain faithful to the language of one’s particular history and culture.
References


