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[ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE]

English as a Foreign Language in Indian Political Discourse: A Review of Oratorical Styles, Language Proficiency, and Sociolinguistic Identity

Dr. C. Sangeetha,

*Assistant Professor of Tamil,
Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education,
(Deemed to be University), Krishnankoil, Virudhunagar – 626126,
Tamil Nadu, India.*

I. Suryakala,

*Department of English,
Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education,
Krishnankoil, Virudhunagar – 626126*

**Corresponding Author: Dr. C. Sangeetha , Email: sangeetha.c@klu.ac.in*

Abstract

English has travelled a long road in India, from a colonial medium to a powerful public language used in politics, media, and international diplomacy. In contemporary India, political speeches delivered in English carry symbolic value, shaping public attitudes and national identity. This review paper explores how English functions as a foreign language in Indian political communication and how leading political figures use it to project authority, credibility, and identity. The study brings together theoretical ideas from EFL studies, Sociolinguistics, and Critical Discourse Analysis to understand how Indian politicians handle English in their public speeches. The paper reviews iconic figures such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, and J. Jayalalithaa, and moves toward unavoidable contemporary personalities like Shashi Tharoor and Narendra Modi, who stand at two ends of the English-proficiency spectrum. Their unique linguistic choices show how English in political life is not just a language but a tool of image-making. The review highlights code-switching, rhetorical moves, pronunciation patterns, vocabulary choice, and audience design. The conclusion argues that English in Indian politics is a living, shifting performance, revealing how power, identity, and language walk hand-in-hand in the public sphere.

Keywords: Political Discourse, Language Ideologies, Power Dynamics, Rhetorical Strategies, Public Narratives, Socio-linguistic Framing.

1. Introduction

Political speeches are never just words; they are windows into a leader's mind and mirrors of a nation's language culture. In India, where hundreds of languages breathe side by side, English holds a special place. It is both a foreign language and a familiar companion. It divides and unites. It signals status, yet it also serves as a practical medium for governance. English carries the weight of history, the shine of global aspiration, and the charm of elite education.

Since Independence, Indian politicians have used English to speak to Parliament, to the world, and sometimes even to their own citizens. Their English reflects their schooling, region, ideology, and experiences. For some, English is a natural flow; for others, it is a learned craft. Yet every speech shows how language and power walk together. This review paper explores how Indian political English has grown, shifted, and taken new shapes. The aim is simple but meaningful: to see how politicians use English not just as a tool of communication but as a tool of identity. The paper studies their fluency, accents, vocabulary strength, rhetorical tricks, and code-switching patterns. It also shows how their English creates public images, whether of authority, humility, intellect, or global reach.

We give special focus to two unavoidable figures in modern India: Shashi Tharoor and Narendra Modi. One stands as a symbol of global fluent English; the other stands as a symbol of strategic, accessible English. Their contrasting styles reveal the diversity of Indian political communication. Alongside them, historical figures such as Nehru, Indira Gandhi, and Jayalalithaa add depth to our understanding of English in political leadership. As the saying goes, “language makes the leader,” and in India, English plays a big part in that journey.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 EFL (English as a Foreign Language) Perspective

Though English is widely used in India, in linguistic terms it still occupies a foreign-language space for most speakers. Many Indian politicians learned English through formal schooling rather than natural exposure. This results in patterns such as:

1. simplified grammar
2. direct translations from mother tongue
3. careful sentence construction
4. avoidance of long structures
5. pronunciation influenced by regional accents

EFL research helps us understand why some politicians speak English fluently while others keep it short and sweet. The idea of “interlanguage” is useful here this shows how learners create their own version of English while moving toward proficiency. Indian politicians often display interlanguage features, especially when speaking spontaneously.

2.2 Sociolinguistic Identity Theory

Language is not only a tool; it is an identity badge. In India, English is seen as a sign of education, class, and modernity. Politicians use English to project:

- confidence
- global awareness
- intellectual credibility
- leadership status

At the same time, they switch to regional languages to show closeness to the people. This dance between English and the mother tongue helps them build a dual identity: one local, one global. Gender also plays a role. Leaders like Indira Gandhi and Jayalalithaa used English to construct strong female authority in a male-dominated sphere.

2.3 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

CDA helps us read between the lines. It tells us how power hides inside language. Politicians choose particular words to show strength, unity, or moral stance. English vocabulary, especially abstract political terms like *democracy*, *development*, *justice*, *secularism* which is used to signal ideology and vision.

CDA helps us examine:

1. metaphor use
2. repetition
3. lexical choices
4. tone
5. persuasive patterns

These tools help us study the speeches of Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Jayalalithaa, Tharoor, and Modi in a systematic way.

3. Review of Major Political Figures

3.1 Jawaharlal Nehru: The Craftsman of Elite English

Nehru's English is remembered for its poetic elegance. His education in Harrow and Cambridge gave him near-native fluency. His speeches flow like a smooth river, with long sentences, rich vocabulary, and a calm persuasive tone. "Tryst with Destiny" stands as a testimony to his command over English rhythm and imagery. Nehru's English symbolized modern India stepping into the world with confidence. It also represented the English-speaking elite class of postcolonial India. His language style became a model for several generations of politicians.

3.2 Indira Gandhi: The Voice of Controlled Authority

Indira Gandhi's English was clear, concise, and firm. She avoided unnecessary ornamentation and used moderate vocabulary to make sharp points. Her style carried quiet authority which is measured, strategic, and direct. She often used English to project international leadership, especially during diplomatic visits. Her voice tone and careful pacing added weight to her speeches. Her English also challenged gender stereotypes, proving that a woman's voice could command national respect.

3.3 J. Jayalalithaa: Precision and Poise

Jayalalithaa remains one of the most articulate English speakers among South Indian politicians. Educated in convent schools and exposed to public speaking through cinema, she had excellent pronunciation, controlled tone, and strong grammar.

Her English reflected dignity, discipline, and sharp political reasoning. In the Tamil political field, her English set her apart. She used English strategically in Assemblies and media interactions to show mastery and command.

4. Contemporary Icons: Shashi Tharoor and Narendra Modi

4.1 Shashi Tharoor: The Global English Diplomat

Shashi Tharoor is known for his advanced vocabulary and smooth delivery. Words roll off his tongue with ease, whether he is debating in Parliament or giving a lecture abroad. His long sentences, rich lexicon, and witty remarks reveal years of reading, writing, and global exposure. Tharoor's English reflects the "international Indian"—someone comfortable in multiple cultures. His speeches show precise grammar, controlled pacing, and clever phrasing. He often uses humour and intertextual references, making his English both intellectual and relatable. From an EFL viewpoint, he exhibits mastery. From a sociolinguistic angle, he represents the elite, educated class. From a CDA lens, his English helps him claim intellectual authority.

4.2 Narendra Modi: The Strategic EFL Communicator

Narendra Modi represents the opposite style but with equal power. His English is shaped by adult learning, political need, and careful practice. He uses English not as a showcase of vocabulary but as a tool of clarity. His English is:

1. slogan-heavy
2. short and rhythmic
3. media-friendly
4. emotionally charged
5. easy for international ears

He avoids complex syntax and sticks to straightforward lines like "Make in India", "Zero Defect, Zero Effect", and "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas". Though originally Hindi-centric, his speeches in English

during UN sessions and foreign trips display notable improvement. Modi's English is a perfect example of how EFL learners can use simple language to sound strong. His pauses, hand gestures, and vocal stress play a big role in his effectiveness. His English carries traces of Hindi discourse structure, which makes it uniquely Indian.

4.3 Tharoor vs Modi: A Tale of Two Style of English

Tharoor and Modi make a perfect comparative pair:

Feature	Shashi Tharoor	Narendra Modi
Vocabulary	Advanced, global	Simple, slogan-based
Sentence Style	Long, layered	Short, punchy
Tone	Smooth, witty	Commanding, direct
Fluency	Near-native	Functional
Identity	Cosmopolitan intellectual	Grassroot leader

They stand on two ends, like two pillars supporting the same bridge of Indian political English. One brings polish; the other brings power. Together, they show how English in India can be both high-class and people-friendly.

5. Code-Switching as a Political Strategy

Indian politicians code-switch like breathing. They move between English and Hindi, or Tamil, or Bengali depending on the audience. This switching serves many purposes:

1. closeness to local listeners
2. distance from elite impression
3. clarity for international listeners
4. emotional impact
5. rhetorical mixing

Modi moves effortlessly between Hindi for emotional connection and English for international visibility. Jayalithaa used Tamil for mass politics and English for administrative authority. Indira Gandhi balanced Hindi and English with precision. Code-switching shows linguistic flexibility and political intelligence.

6. Discussion

This review shows that English in Indian politics is not a one-size-fits-all story. It is a rainbow with many shades. Politicians use English to project identity, ideology, and authority. Some use it to impress, others to connect, and some to balance both. Politicians like Tharoor and Nehru show elite English. Modi shows strategic EFL usage. Jayalalithaa shows bilingual mastery. Indira Gandhi shows disciplined authority. Their different styles prove one thing: In India, English is not just a language; it is a performance.

It shapes public memory, media image, and even political destiny.

7. Conclusion

English in Indian political discourse is a dynamic and evolving phenomenon. It blends colonial history, regional identity, and global aspirations. From Nehru's poetic tone to Tharoor's intellectual flourish, and from Jayalalithaa's polished delivery to Modi's strategic simplicity, Indian politicians show that English can travel many paths. This review suggests that future studies should build speech corpora, map pronunciation features, and compare political English across regions. Indian political English is a living story, still being written every day.

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