Linguistic Extraction in Indian Advertising: Authenticity, Commodification, and Cultural Signifiers

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Abstract

Modern Indian advertising uses culturally loaded words like 'Ayurveda', ‘Organic’ and 'Desi' to build trust and make products appear more authentic. In this paper, we explore how hybridization of English and Indian languages, along with cultural signs, is employed in the advertisements to connect with the consumers. However, the excessive usage of such terms in a marketing context can make them loose their value. This study highlights this phenomenon of ‘linguistic extraction’ questioning who profits from this commodification of culture through language while emptying the true meaning of the traditionally rooted words. It argues for a space where brands give respect and credit to the history of these words and practice it responsibly instead of reducing them to mere marketing labels. The purpose is not to condemn every instance of cultural language in advertising, but to sharpen our tools for looking and judging.

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Language as a Semiotic Resource in Branding

Walk through any Indian supermarket or scroll through a festival-season ad break and a pattern jumps out. Bottles and billboards are crowded with words like Ayurvedic, organic, natural, traditional, satvik and desi. These are not just decorative flourishes, but signs that do a great deal of work, reassuring buyers that a soap is "pure," a snack is "traditional," and that a wellness drink is somehow better than its processed rivals. Contemporary advertising, in other words, has learned to lean heavily on language that is culturally loaded. In order to understand this, advertising must be seen beyond mere labels and taglines. As Barthes reminds us, language operates within a wider semiotic economy, where every term is a sign that brings with it a group of associations (Barthes, 1972). Sociolinguists also refer to the the "indexical" force of linguistic choice, where particular ways of speaking point to specific identities, attitudes, or worlds (Silverstein, 2003). This become even more explicit in India, with a multilingual, multicultural setting, where many people move daily between several languages and registers. In such a setting, the choice of one word over another can assertively shape how an advertisement is heard. Similarly, research on bilingual branding has repeatedly shown that language choice affects whether consumers perceive a message as authentic, aspirational, or "for people like us" (Bhatia, 2000; Leclerc et al., 1994).

The term ayurveda offers a clear example of such a choice of word. Advertisers frequently tie this word to phrases such as 'clinically proven' or 'scientifically tested,' trying to stitch together the authority of antiquity with the credibility of modern science, a pattern documented in studies of hybrid health rhetoric in India (Naraindas, 2019). One adjective is thus asked to distinguish a product from its rivals, invite trust, and signal access to indigenous expertise. Not surprisingly, the Advertising Standards Council of India has repeatedly had to

intervene when “Ayurvedic” or “herbal” claims are stretched to cover products that do little more than borrow the label.

The same layering is visible in other popular terms. Literally, *Ayurveda*, *Prakriti*, *Satvik*, *Desi* point to medicine, nature, purity, locality. In everyday use they reach further. *Ayurveda* hints at holistic well-being and civilisational depth; *Prakriti* suggests the “natural” and environmentally attuned; *Satvik* carries a moral–spiritual charge of restraint and “clean” living; *Desi* leans on ideas of ordinariness, intimacy, and national pride. Advertisers are keenly aware of these resonances. They select not only the words but also the scripts, fonts, and visual settings in which they appear, arranging the signifiers so that the desired signifieds, purity, tradition, rootedness, spring to mind in ways that support a brand’s chosen persona (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

Indigenous-language choices also do indexical work. They point to broader cultural and social fields and can hint at who is imagined as the ideal consumer. This follows the wider argument in linguistic anthropology that indexical signs connect language use with social identities and positions (Silverstein, 2003). The presence of Sanskrit vocabulary in an advertisement, for example, can index “traditional Indian culture” and sometimes a specific classed and caste-marked milieu: upper-caste, formally educated, conservative, or “respectable.” A colloquial word from a regional dialect, by contrast, may index a particular state, rural life, or “down-to-earth” charm. Marketers can and do use this quite carefully. A pan-Indian brand might opt for a Sanskritized Hindi register to secure broad recognition, while a regionally focused brand might build its entire tagline around a local word that immediately signals ethnic rootedness and familiarity.

A related, and increasingly visible, strategy is the graphic insertion of Devanagari or other Indian scripts into mostly English layouts. An English print advertisement might suddenly place “आयुर्वेद” (Ayurveda) in Devanagari at the centre of the design, even if all

surrounding text is in Roman script. The sight of a "traditional" script amidst English text can act as a small visual jolt, reassuring readers that the product is culturally grounded and "ours." In contemporary consumer culture the visual form and sound of language are treated as objects in their own right, invested with aesthetic and symbolic value (Jaworski, 2014).

In Indian advertising, then, a small patch of Hindi or Sanskrit, or a flourish of Urdu calligraphy in certain product categories, can operate as a visual shorthand for cultural authenticity. This is not uniquely Indian. Italian brands often slip a line or two of Italian into global campaigns to index Italianità, and French perfume ads frequently rely on a French catchphrase to evoke sophistication, in line with research on how "foreignness" is strategically mobilized in advertising (Kelly-Holmes, 2000). What complicates the Indian case is the overwhelming presence of English in elite and pan-Indian campaigns. Against this backdrop, the deliberate use of a vernacular term or script stands out as a marked gesture. It tends to be read as a sign of sincerity and inclusion, an attempt to reach out to consumers in "their own" voice, even when the surrounding frame remains largely Anglophone (Bhatia, 2000).

Hybridity and Glocalization in Indian Advertising

Indian advertising offers a small but telling window onto a wider cultural logic of hybridity in which the global and the local are constantly mixed, reworked, and made to coexist. Historically, the industry has travelled a long way from the colonial period, when English dominated and campaigns were largely imagined for metropolitan elites, to the post-liberalization era, where it feels almost natural to see Hindi, English, and regional languages sharing the same frame and to find "traditional" motifs packaged through contemporary marketing techniques (Bhatia, 2000; Kumar, 2013). This shift echoes Jan Nederveen Pieterse's argument about "globalization as hybridization": globalization does not simply flatten local cultures but pushes them into new, mixed forms (Nederveen Pieterse, 2004). In advertising this is often described as glocalization, when global brands fine-tune their messages to Indian

cultural cues and Indian brands, in turn, present local idioms as exportable and globally legible (Robertson, 1995).

From the early 1990s onwards, after economic liberalization opened the door to multinational brands, one can trace how agencies and creatives gradually recognized that mere importation of global templates would not suffice; campaigns needed to sound and feel local if they were to stick (Mazzarella, 2003). The work of Piyush Pandey in that decade is frequently cited here: Cadbury Dairy Milk's Hindi-driven campaigns or Fevicol's ads built around folk humour showed that thinking directly in an Indian idiom, rather than translating Western ideas word for word, could produce striking results (Pandey, 2019). The aim was not to discard global advertising know-how but to bend it: to retain high production values and familiar persuasive strategies while saturating them with Indian languages, cultural references, and everyday sensibilities.

You see this most clearly in the way many Indian ads hop between languages. A television commercial, a YouTube pre-roll, a bus-shelter poster: all of them can carry an English headline, a Hindi sub-line, and a body copy that slips in and out of both. What might look like casual mixing is, in fact, patterned. Sociolinguists have long argued that code-switching is rarely random; it does identity work and lets several social meanings operate at once (Gumperz, 1982; Myers-Scotton, 1993). For advertisers, this habitual switching opens up a way to address more than one "self" in the same viewer. English is made to stand for aspiration, corporate competence, being plugged into a wider, global world. Hindi or other regional languages, on the other hand, pull in associations of family, neighbourhood, intimacy, "home." Putting the two side by side quietly suggests that these positions do not cancel each other out. One can be modern and rooted, global and local, without having to choose. This layered self-image is already familiar to many urban Indians, and advertising both reflects and stabilises it. Viewers recognise the pattern because it mirrors their own linguistic routines; it

matches the everyday bilingualism that scholars like Kachru have taken as a hallmark of Indian sociolinguistic life (Kachru, 2006).

Jan Nederveen Pieterse's account of hybridity lets us move beyond the easy description of these ads as a simple "mix of old and new." For him, hybridity is not an exception but an emerging norm, one that unsettles the idea of stable, bounded cultural identities (Nederveen Pieterse, 2004). Looked at this way, the experiments we see in advertising are part of a larger shift. What begins as an eye-catching novelty, soon hardens into a familiar trope, and with it, the baseline of audience expectation moves. It is not far-fetched to say that many Indian viewers now expect a certain amount of "cultural masala" in their ads; a spot that looks and sounds entirely Western can feel oddly flat or distant. Industry commentary has noted how TV commercials that blend "varied cultural-aesthetic elements" tend to connect more strongly, as they fuse global brand ideas with local visual and musical idioms (Economic Times Brand Equity, 2019). Hybridity here is not just an aesthetic choice by agencies; it maps onto the fact that audiences themselves live hybrid lives.

Advertisers are, in a sense, simply reflecting the everyday mix that defines many urban Indians: one language at home, another in school and at work; Hollywood and Bollywood on the same streaming platform; Diwali parties and office Christmas get-togethers; pizza for dinner one night, paratha or biryani the next. A food-delivery app that shows a family ordering both pizza and biryani in a single scene is not indulging in fantasy; it is reproducing a very ordinary kind of consumption. It is also quite natural, in that setting, for the dialogue to slide between Punjabi pet names and Americanised English slang. Kachru's description of Indian bilingualism as woven into everyday practice is clearly visible here (Kachru, 2006).

While hybridity is often celebrated as evidence of cultural creativity and resilience, it also poses creative and ethical challenges. The balance between global and local elements can easily tilt into tokenism. A campaign that sprinkles a stray Hindi proverb into an otherwise

completely Western narrative, for example, risks coming across as clumsy or opportunistic rather than genuinely embedded (Douglas & Craig, 2011). Indian agencies have had decades to experiment, fail, and refine their instincts in this area, which is why many high-profile campaigns now feel more assured. There are also real examples that prove this knack for compressed hybridity. The Jeevansathi matrimony app's 2023 outdoor campaign, for instance, used billboards that read "Even Nick has a desi girl, find your desi match" invoked American singer Nick Jonas, the phrase "desi girl" (itself a diasporic English coinage) and the long-standing institution of arranged marriage in a single stroke. In that one line, global celebrity culture, English slang, and the familiar idea of a "match" in Indian matrimony meet each other, neatly capturing the kind of hybrid communication Kachru discusses (Kachru, 2006).

Thinking through hybridity in this way also prepares the ground for the next set of questions: why does all this matter for postcolonial identity and for how people understand ethical consumption? Once linguistic and cultural symbols are continually mixed, rebranded, and sold back to consumers, what does that say about how a postcolonial society imagines itself and its values? The following section turns to these questions, linking contemporary advertising practices to broader debates about identity, value, and consumption ethics in present-day India.

Linguistic Extraction and the Commodification of Culture

When Indian advertisements lean on culturally specific language, they are part of a wider pattern in late-modern consumer culture: the turning of cultural signs into marketable resources, a trend traced in sociolinguistics and cultural studies as the commodification of language and culture (Heller, 2010; Kelly-Holmes, 2000). The examples discussed in this article show how a single word can carry an unusually dense semiotic and affective load. Brands draw on such terms to suggest authenticity, spiritual purity, or an ethical, indigenous ethos, and in doing so try to stand out in an increasingly crowded global marketplace. Framed through the lenses of linguistic commodification, authenticity signalling, and hybridity,

advertising language emerges not as a neutral conveyor of information but as a kind of symbolic capital. It is something that can be selectively drawn from a shared cultural repertoire, packaged, and attached to products in order to create value.

One idea that surfaces repeatedly in this exploration is what we refer to as linguistic extraction. The term is meant quite literally, as it points to those moments when bits of language, words, fixed phrases, scripts, even particular symbols, are lifted out of the cultural, spiritual, or communal lifeworlds where they normally live and put to work in commercial settings. In some sense, it is a kind of appropriation, but one that leans on the analogy with resource extraction: minerals, plants, labour can be drawn out, processed, and sold; so, too, can cultural expressions. In India this often takes the form of terms drawn from classical texts or long-standing practices being recast as contemporary marketing hooks. *Ayurveda* is perhaps the most obvious example. In its own framework it names a complex medical philosophy and way of living; on a shampoo or toothpaste tube, "Ayurvedic" shrinks into a reassuring label that simply signals "natural" and "trustworthy." Yoga offers a parallel story. As yoga has been commodified across the world, Sanskrit words, chants, and concepts routinely crop up in the promotion of yoga mats, retreats, or athleisure lines, turning cultural-linguistic material into a straightforward branding resource (Johnston & Barcan, 2006).

Extraction of this sort almost always involves a strong element of decontextualisation. Graham Huggan, writing about exoticism, notes that commodification typically works by pulling cultural elements out of their thick, historically layered contexts and inserting them into new consumer narratives (Huggan, 2001). In such cases, something is always left behind. What is conveyed is often a carefully trimmed fragment that is barely recognisable enough to read as "authentic" or "traditional," but largely detached from the denser ethical, historical, or spiritual frameworks that once gave it shape. That is not to say that such an extraction is entirely negative; once a word is pulled into the marketplace, it can acquire a new kind of energy.

Expressions that might once have sounded slightly dusty now carry a faint aura of cool among younger speakers, tugging at the old hierarchy in which English alone was allowed to stand for being modern and upwardly mobile.

But once we name this as extraction, a different set of questions pushes to the front, and they are harder to ignore. Who gets to decide what these words mean after they have been repackaged? Who actually pockets the surplus value they generate? When *Ayurveda* is turned into a logo or a punchy tagline, it is easy for both the narrative and the revenue to drift away from the people who have kept the tradition alive and settle instead with large companies. There is also the matter of simple overuse. If every soap, snack, and face wash in the supermarket claims "Ayurvedic purity," the phrase begins to lose its meaning. The more it is stretched to cover anything vaguely "herbal," the thinner its ethical and medical force becomes. In some cases, consumers are being sold an illusion, and repeated encounters with such hollow or exaggerated claims can feed a deeper scepticism. The risk is that people do not only lose faith in a particular brand; they start to doubt the cultural forms invoked in its name. India has already seen episodes where inflated claims by "spiritual" or "natural" product marketers have provoked public scepticism and regulatory responses, such as advisories from the Ministry of AYUSH against misleading Ayurvedic claims (Press Information Bureau, 2018). Extraction without accountability, in other words, risks pushing commodification to a cynical extreme, where authenticity becomes a mere surface effect and consumers cease to believe in it at all.

Linguistic extraction is not a neat, technical trick; it is entangled with questions of who gets to speak and who gets seen. In the Indian case, what stands out is that the "extractor" is rarely a foreign corporation or a colonial office. Often, it is an insider: actors that operate inside a postcolonial democracy, but also plugged into a global capitalist circuit that rewards speed and scale far more readily than slow forms of cultural care. Thinking in terms of linguistic extraction means staying with awkward but necessary questions about consent and benefit-

sharing, even when the actors involved are “our own” companies and media houses rather than an external coloniser.

With some forms of tangible heritage, such questions have at least begun to leave a trace in law and policy. The high-profile disputes over biopiracy, and India’s creation of the Traditional Knowledge Digital Library to head off patents on medicinal plants and remedies, show that it is possible, unevenly and imperfectly, to demand acknowledgement and a measure of protection. Language, by contrast, is harder to pin down; they do not lend themselves easily to fences. Even so, one can imagine modest correctives: recognition schemes that work a little like geographical indications for particular expressions, or, more simply, a basic expectation that brands will name the traditions they lean on instead of treating terms such as *Ayurvedic* or *satvik* as detachable bits of heritage flavour.

Extraction leaves its mark on identity as well. When certain linguistic registers are amplified over and over, others slip quietly to the edges. Ayurveda and yoga are now staples of national advertising; meanwhile, the linguistic and ritual worlds shaped by other religious and ethnic practices of Dalit and Adivasi communities surface only occasionally. Over time, this uneven visibility redraws the map of belonging. It shrinks the imagined range of what counts as “properly Indian,” not only by lifting some words out of their settings, but by quietly narrowing the cultural terrain those words are allowed to stand in for. What, then, might count as an ethical way forward? A blanket refusal to use cultural language in advertising is neither realistic nor desirable. The more promising move is to stretch the frame so that India’s internal diversity is treated as an advantage rather than a nuisance to be smoothed away.

Even with such experiments, the broader reliance on culturally marked language in Indian advertising remains deeply double-edged. It has energised the field, produced memorable campaigns, and opened up new ways of voicing pride and belonging. At the same time, it has made it easier to trade in clichés, to flatten complexity into neat tropes, and to

circulate a ready-made, somewhat hollow idea of authenticity. Calling this pattern *linguistic extraction* does not fix the problem, but it does give us a clearer term for thinking about it. It helps mark the point at which inventive borrowing begins to look more like mining, and invites us to ask how far a word can be stretched before it is emptied of the very substance that once made it powerful. What is happening here is not unique to India. It fits a broader pattern in late-capitalist economies where culture, styles of talk, accents, identities, becomes a key differentiating resource, in line with Heller's description of a "new economy" that trades in the commodification of language and identity (Heller, 2010). The Indian case is instructive because this process unfolds not only between languages, global English versus local tongues, but also *within* the same cultural field, as particular registers and words are repeatedly singled out and put to work for their symbolic charge.

We have used the term *linguistic extraction* as a shorthand for these practices. The phrase is meant to capture the mining of culturally saturated language for commercial ends and to offer a way of asking when such mining is taking place and with what stakes. The idea is not limited to India. One might read the calculated deployment of Māori phrases in New Zealand tourism campaigns, or the stylised use of Native American names and motifs in US branding, as parallel instances of linguistic or cultural extraction, often sharpened by long-standing colonial inequalities (Smith, 2012; Deloria, 1998). India complicates the picture. Much of the extraction here is carried out by domestic actors in a moment of rising national confidence, and can be framed as a kind of self-appropriation that appears less obviously exploitative. Yet that does not remove the risk. Self-extraction can easily tip into self-exoticisation: a society learning to see itself mainly in terms of what can be packaged, simplified, and sold. Critics of the global "yoga industry" or of export-ready versions of "Indian spirituality" have been pointing to exactly this tendency for some time.

What currently looks like an obsession with regional and "traditional" words in Indian advertising is not just a passing quirk of style. It functions more like a long-running conversation about who "we" are, only the conversation happens through taglines, pack copy, and thirty-second films. With every choice of *desi*, *satvik* or *prakriti*, a postcolonial nation is trying to put its archive to work, sometimes as a gesture of reclaiming and revaluing what was once sidelined, sometimes as a matter of thinning that archive down and wrapping it for easy consumption. The familiar theoretical questions reappear here with a different edge: how is "authenticity" assembled when almost everything comes to us as a brand? In what ways is the "exotic" sanded down, stylised, and sold back to the very publics it sprang from? And how do people fold these products, and their slogans, into the way they tell themselves who they are?

Precisely for that reason, the responsibility of advertisements here is not trivial. Once a phrase or symbol migrates into the realm of logos, jingles, and trademarks, it draws in a whole network of actors and institutions that claim to speak for "culture" itself. The issue is no longer whether cultural language should appear in ads, it already does, and will continue to, but on what terms. In an ideal version of this story, talk of authenticity would not be just a decorative layer, but a small bridge, pointing viewers back toward the histories, practices, and communities that gave these words their charge in the first place.

There is no reason to think this tension will settle neatly in India any time soon; if anything, it will intensify as platforms multiply and new markets open up. The point of naming processes like linguistic extraction is not to condemn every instance of cultural language in advertising, but to sharpen our tools for looking and judging. It is a reminder that words arrive already layered with histories, hierarchies, and ethical claims. Keeping that in mind may be one of the few ways to ensure that the rhetoric of authenticity does not entirely lose its substance, even as it is stamped, hashtagged, and broadcast across the everyday circuits of consumption.

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