

# Sociolinguistic Dimensions in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*: Linguistic Imperialism and Translingualism

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## Abstract

E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) serves as a critical literary artifact that reflects the sociolinguistic realities of British colonial rule in India. This paper examines the novel through the lenses of linguistic imperialism and translingualism, exploring how language functions as both a tool of power and a means of resistance. By analyzing dialogues, narrative structures, and character interactions, this study elucidates the complex interplay between English and indigenous languages in colonial discourse.

**Keywords:** Linguistic imperialism; Translingualism; Colonial dominance; Resistance; *A Passage to India*

## 1. Introduction

Language plays a pivotal role in constructing and maintaining colonial hierarchies, serving both as a medium of communication and a tool of subjugation. E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) provides a rich ground for exploring linguistic imperialism and translingualism as key sociolinguistic dimensions of colonial discourse. Through his portrayal of multilingual characters and cross-cultural interactions, Forster critically examines the linguistic barriers that reinforce imperial domination and the potential for hybrid linguistic spaces that challenge hegemonic structures.

## 2. Linguistic imperialism in *A Passage to India*

The domination of one language over another is referred to as linguistic imperialism. It occurs when a strong nation forces its language on other countries. Local languages and cultures are frequently marginalized as a result of this process. The dominant language turns into a weapon for preserving authority and dominance. Linguistic imperialism is also often facilitated by political and economic power structures (Phillipson, 1992). This sociolinguistic dimension is evident in *A Passage to India*.

### 2.1. English as a tool of colonial authority in *A Passage to India*

English is positioned as the language of governance, law, and social prestige, reinforcing the British Raj's authority. The British characters, particularly figures like Ronny Heaslop and Mr. Turton, insist on English as the primary medium of interaction symbolizing the language as a marker of power and civilization, dismissing Indian languages as inadequate for administration and intellectual discourse.

During Dr. Aziz's trial, language becomes a tool of power. The legal proceedings are conducted in English, reinforcing the colonial legal framework that disadvantages the colonized. The linguistic barriers contribute to misunderstandings, particularly when Adela Quested fails to articulate her experience clearly, leading to a miscarriage of justice.

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## 2.2. Suppression and erasure of indigenous languages

Throughout the novel, the British characters demonstrate a reluctance to engage with Indian languages, signaling their refusal to acknowledge indigenous languages. While characters like Fielding attempt to bridge the linguistic gap, the overall colonial attitude reflects a disregard for linguistic diversity. The novel highlights linguistic suppression through the portrayal of interactions between British and Indian characters. The British expect Indians to communicate in English, yet they make little effort to learn native languages. For instance, Ronny Heaslop remarks, "English is the language of the law," emphasizing the exclusivity of English in administrative and legal matters (Forster, 1924, p. 78). This reflects the colonial assumption that English is unique and necessary for governance, mirroring historical realities where English served as the medium for education and administration, sidelining vernacular languages.

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## 3. Translingualism in *A Passage to India*

Translingualism refers to the ability to move across linguistic boundaries, often blending elements from different languages to create new forms of meaning. Here, language is not understood through the fixed grammar anymore, but rather focuses on "how individuals resourcefully mobilize and transcend through different linguistic resources at their disposal and adopt different negotiation strategies to make meanings" (Canagarajah, 2013). Through the framework of translingualism, as defined by Canagarajah (2013), Forster's portrayal of multilingual interactions in *A Passage to India* reflects the complexities of cross-cultural communication, highlighting moments of both assimilation and resistance.

### 3.1. Translingualism as cultural mediation and resistance

In *A Passage to India*, translingual encounters emerge in the dialogues between Indian and British characters, revealing moments of cultural mediation and resistance. Dr. Aziz, the novel's central Indian character, embodies translingual agency, shifting between English, Urdu, and Hindustani. While he speaks English fluently, he also experiences linguistic alienation. His use of Urdu poetry and references to Persian literature highlight the richness of indigenous linguistic traditions, countering the homogenizing force of English. Moreover, translingualism manifests in characters like Cyril Fielding, who engages in meaningful cross-cultural exchanges, attempting to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps. Unlike most British officials, Fielding values multilingual competence and rejects the rigid linguistic boundaries imposed by imperial ideology.

### 3.2. Translingualism and cultural hybridity

While linguistic imperialism is pervasive, *A Passage to India* also reveals moments of translingualism, where linguistic and cultural exchanges occur despite colonial constraints. The interactions between British officials and Indian characters often involve linguistic borrowings such as "pukka sahib" and "tonga," which signal colonial authority while simultaneously acknowledging the necessity of cultural adaptation. Characters like Fielding, who attempts to engage with Indian perspectives, and Aziz, who oscillates between languages depending on his audience, illustrate the hybrid nature of colonial discourse (Canagarajah, 2013).

### 3.3. The Marabar Caves: the limits of language

A key moment of linguistic breakdown occurs in the Marabar Caves, where the word "boum" that echoes within the caves is an example of a translingual allusion with an indeterminate linguistic origin, fails to bridge cultural gaps. Adela Quested's inability to articulate her experience in the caves, combined with the overwhelming echo that distorts meaning, symbolizes the inadequacy of colonial language structures. The caves serve as a metaphor for the collapse of linguistic certainty, suggesting that no single language can fully capture the complexities of human experience.

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## 4. Translingualism versus linguistic imperialism

The British administrators in the novel generally reject translingual practices, reinforcing linguistic imperialism by insisting on English as the dominant mode of discourse. By contrast, Indian characters who engage in translingualism challenge this power structure, demonstrating the fluidity and adaptability of language in resistance to imperial authority.

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## 5. Conclusion

Forster's *A Passage to India* provides a nuanced critique of linguistic imperialism while simultaneously exploring the possibilities of translingualism. English, as a colonial language, serves both as a device of dominance and a means of intercultural negotiation. The novel foregrounds the power asymmetries embedded in language use while also

gesturing towards linguistic hybridity as a space of resistance and cross-cultural engagement. By examining these sociolinguistic dimensions, we gain a deeper understanding of the colonial encounter and its enduring linguistic legacy.

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