

Facilitate Learning of French: Drawing Parallels Between Hindi and French

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Abstract

Indian learners who are more fluent in their regional language than English hesitate to learn French because of the apparent differences between their regional language and French. Based on the theory of contrastive analysis, this article compares a general formal conversation and some of the aspects of the grammar of Hindi, one of the two official Indian languages, with French to identify the comfort zone for learners to approach the language more openly and be assured that learning French is indeed possible. This comparison creates a space for Hindi learners to opt for French increasingly taught in schools, colleges, and universities as a third language. In this era of globalisation, learning French would also open career options and avenues for education in foreign countries.

Keywords: French language learning, Hindi-French contrastive analysis

Introduction

Though French and Hindi originate from the same Proto-Indo-European language, they have evolved differently and are spoken in geographically and culturally distant areas. Yet, the common origin suggests a similarity between the two languages. Their contrastive analysis can reveal similarities and differences facilitating a better understanding of the languages. For language learners, this can result in either transfer or interference. If learners engage in comparing the languages themselves, the chances of interference may be greater. If facilitators consciously harness contrastive analysis in classes to create

an awareness of common/divergent linguistic features, positive transfer may take precedence over interference. A comparative approach can create an accessible ground for Hindi learners because moving from the known to the unknown can support the learning process by generating more interest. At the same time, the comparison may assist in sustaining the learner's motivation to learn French. For a learner fluent in Hindi but not conversant with English, this comparison shows that avenues to French are not closed. Hindi could aid in learning French despite the apparent proximity of English and French.

Nevertheless, since excessive use of Hindi to support learning French can cause interference and dependence, it can only be used initially until the learner is comfortable with French. Therefore, the next sections offer limited examples of using Hindi to facilitate learning French with lexical, grammatical, cultural, and phonological explanations.

Comparing Hindi and French

This section discusses an introductory formal conversation and some elements of grammar. Their cultural and language-based explanations demonstrate how the comparative technique can be used in a classroom. The usefulness of transcribing French pronunciation into Hindi has also been explored. English translations have been provided beside the French words/expressions/sentences in parentheses to ensure clarity for all readers.

An Introductory Conversation

Following is a discussion of how a short basic formal conversation in French can be explained based on semantic, linguistic, phonetic, syntactical, and cultural similarities and differences.

- Bonjour Madame! (Good morning madam!)
- Bonjour Monsieur! Comment allez-vous? (Good morning sir! How are you?/How is it going?)
- Très bien! Et vous? (Very good! And you?)
- Super. Comment vous appelez-vous ? (Great. What is your name?/How are you called?)
- Je m'appelle Nicolas. Et vous? (My name is Nicolas. And yours?)
- Marie. (Marie.)

Though formal greetings are similar in Hindi and French, the accompanying gestures are distinct. “Bonjour” is a polite greeting culturally acceptable at most times of the day like *namaste* नमस्ते. While wishing someone “Bonjour”, one either tends to shake hands or kiss on each cheek (depending on familiarity). As one says *namaste* नमस्ते, it is customary to fold one’s hands in front of his/her chest. And in some cases, the young touch elders’ feet to seek their blessings as a mark of respect.

Next, while formal French addresses are limited, Hindi covers a wider range. The use of Madame (madam), mademoiselle (miss), and monsieur (sir) is based on their gender and age. These words denote respect. Madame is used for married women and mademoiselle for unmarried girls. Monsieur is for men and boys, irrespective of age. In Hindi, using the gender-neutral suffix *ji* जी after *namaste* (नमस्ते) conveys the required formality. No other word is essential. There exist formal expressions like *sahab* साहब (for men) or *memsahab* मेमसाहब (for women) inclining towards superior-inferior relationships, unlike French. Besides, words like *bhaiya* भैया for men, *beta* बेटा for male or female children, *beti* बेटी for female children, *bahen* बहन or *bhabhi* भाभी for women, etc. are also used in formal situations to establish a familial relationship with people.

There are specific formal forms of inquiring about a person’s well-being in French and Hindi. The Hindi formal version *aap kaise hain* आप कैसे हैं? differs from French in the verb used. One informal Hindi expression which is the literal equivalent of the French ‘comment allez-vous?’ is *kaisaa chal rahaa hai* कैसा चल रहा है?. Both questions use the verbs ‘allez’ and ‘chal चल’ meaning ‘to go’. As an aside, it could be noted that Hindi has a near equivalent of the commonly used French informal expression ‘Ça va?’ as सब ठीक है?

Further, the use of ‘vous’ as a formal honorific subject pronoun resembles *aap* आप in Hindi. *Aap* आप, like ‘vous’, is used when one does not know the person, or if one is older than he/she, and sometimes is also used when talking to someone younger than he/she. In both languages, the verb used with *aap* आप and ‘vous’ is the plural form.

The question used to ask one’s name, ‘comment vous appelez-vous?’ is unique in French compared to any Indian language due to its reflexive verb ‘s’appeler’ (call oneself). In Hindi, the usual formal question is *aapka naam kya hai* आपका नाम क्या है?. The French question can be transliterated

as *aapko (log) kya bulaate hain?* आपको (लोग) क्या बुलाते हैं? This might seem odd to Hindi learners but can contribute to understanding. The other way, 'Je m'appelle Nicolas. Et vous?' finds its equivalence in *mera naam Nikola hai. aur aapka?* मेरा नाम निकोला है। और आपका? This shows that though certain expressions vary, some equivalents exist between the languages.

Transcribing the pronunciation of French words into Hindi can be useful. Though not all sounds can be reproduced in Hindi, a reasonable amount of accuracy could be achieved for certain sounds in the conversation, especially for the 't' in 'tu' and 'd' in 'madame' by using equivalent Hindi letters, त and द. Moreover, it could be clarified that the other sounds - ट ठ ड ढ - do not exist in French. The 'anusvaar/chandrabindu' (ँ /ं) used in Hindi will help learners understand and replicate the desired nasal sound. Here, the facilitator needs to be familiar with the Hindi reading skills of the learners and create the transcript accordingly to achieve the desired outcome.

- बोंजहूर मोंसीय !
- बोंजहूर मादाम ! कोमों ताले वू ?
- ले बियाँ ! ए वू ?
- स्यूपेर ! कोमों वूज़ाप्ले वू ?
- ज़ मापेल निकोला । ए वू ?
- मारी ।

Delving into the phonological aspect concerning how letters represent sounds, Bhatia (2008, p. 17) states that the Devanagari script is considered the most scientific among the existing systems of the world since the arrangement and classification of the letters and symbols follow a system based on physiological or phonetic principles, namely the point and manner of articulation. Other writing systems, including the Roman system which French uses, employ arbitrary, random criteria to arrange and categorize the letters. That is, each letter represents one sound only in most cases in Devanagari. For example, the [k] sound in Hindi is represented as क but in French, can be represented by k, q, c, and ch. It must be acknowledged that Hindi also has its phonetic nuances like the क in पक is not the same as the k in कप, and the sibilant sounds are also distinct. Nevertheless, for a debutant French learner, a surface-level discussion of the scripts can convey the basic concept of the correspondence between letters and sounds.

The use of accents in French could be equated to the use of 'matras' in Hindi, especially the concept of long and short sounds. For example, the 'é' in 'étudiant' (student) is a long sound while 'è' in 'très' is a short sound. The accents [◌̄] and [◌̀] resemble [◌̄] which denotes a long sound [◌̄] which is comparatively shorter. Though the sounds may not be accurately reproducible, the core idea of using symbols to represent long and short sounds is common.

Finally, syntactically, sentences in French follow the SVO order and Hindi is a SOV language. Nevertheless, the option of restructuring a sentence and yet retaining the meaning is common to both languages. For example, 'comment vous appelez-vous?' could also be 'vous vous appelez comment?' or 'comment vous vous appelez?' and *aapkaa naam kyaa hai?* *आपका नाम क्या है?* can be *kyaa naam hai aapkaa?* *क्या नाम है आपका?*, *naam kyaa hai aapkaa?* *नाम क्या है आपका?* Prepositions and postpositions related to syntax are important concepts. However, since they are not part of the introductory conversation, they have not been discussed.

If facilitators conduct such contrastive analysis when preparing for classes, they can understand how learners interact in the new language and their native language (Lado, 1957, p. 2). They can develop classroom teaching materials blending the known with the unknown to enrich the learners' understanding (Lado, 1957, p. 3). Consequently, learners are likely to develop greater enthusiasm for the target language (Lado, 1957, p. 8) Thus, indulging in such analysis in class can be engaging and fruitful. Encouraging interactions during the analysis will help learners think critically about the language-learning process and this participation can keep them motivated to learn.

The next section focuses on how some grammar items can be conveyed in class.

Grammar

This section investigates and explains similarities and differences in the use of subject pronouns and verbs in French.

Subject Pronouns

A basic understanding in terms of differences between the subject pronouns in French and Hindi is: in Hindi, they are characterised only by number, whereas in French, they carry both gender and number, especially for the third person.

Table 1. *Subject Pronouns in French and Hindi*

	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
First person	Je (I) Main / मैं	Nous (We) Ham / हम
Second person	Tu (You) Tum / तुम Tu / तू	Vous (You) Aap / आप
Third person	Il (masc) (He) Vah / वह	Ils (masc) (They) Ve / वे
	Elle (fem) (She) Vah / वह	Elles (fem) (They) Ve / वे

Table 1 shows that there is only one subject pronoun for masculine and feminine in Hindi for third person singular—*vah* वह—as well as third person plural—*ve* वे. However, in French, “*il*” is used for third person singular masculine and “*elle*” third person singular feminine. Such gender-based distinction can be observed in third-person plural subject pronouns too. Also, in the case of a mixed group, (plural), French uses the masculine third-person plural pronoun.

In addition, the table shows that there are two second-person singular pronouns in Hindi but only one in French. In Hindi, *tum* तुम is formal, *tu* तू is informal. Depending on the context of the conversation, *tu* may denote disrespect. No such distinctions are observed in French. Indeed, intonation and rhythm play a crucial role in conveying meaning. This aspect can be explored in class.

Such comparison aids an understanding of how subject pronouns operate in both languages.

Verbs

The conjugated verbs denote both the number and gender of the subject pronoun in Hindi, whereas in French, they only denote number. For example, as seen in Table 2, the first-person conjugation of the verb has only one form for both masculine and feminine in contrast to Hindi. For the third person, the subject pronoun in Hindi is the same for masculine and feminine, the verb is distinct; vice-versa in French. All said and done, the common underlying concept is that of conjugation. Hence, a comparative approach could be useful in explaining this, and Hindi learners can acknowledge and accept it with greater ease.

Table 2. Conjugation of Verb *Habiter* / *Rehnā* (रहना)

	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
First person	J' habite à Paris. Main Paris me rehta (m) / rehti (f) hoon. मैं पेरिस में रहता/रहती हूँ।	Nous habitons à Paris. Ham Paris me rehte (m/m and f) /rehti (f) hain. हम पेरिस में रहते /रहती (f) हैं।
Second person	Tu habites à Paris. Tum Paris me rehte (m/m and f)/rehti (f) ho. तुम पेरिस में रहते /रहती हो. Tu Paris me rehta (m) / rehti (f) hai. तू पेरिस में रहता/रहती है।	Vous habitez à Paris. Aap Paris me rehte (m/m and f)/rehti hain. आप पेरिस में रहते/रहती हैं।
Third person	Il habite à Paris Vah Paris me rehta (m) hai. वह पेरिस में रहता है।	Ils habitent à Paris Ve Paris me rehte (m/m and f) hain. वे पेरिस में रहते हैं।
	Elle habite à Paris. Vah Paris me rehti (f) hai. वह पेरिस में रहती है।	Elles habitent à Paris. Ve Paris me rehti (f) hain. वे पेरिस में रहती हैं।

Conclusion

The brief contrastive analysis above exemplifies how leaning on a language that aids the learner in moving from the known to the unknown is likely to create familiarity with the foreign language and probably control the affective factors challenging language learning. In the language facilitators' quest for challenging yet interesting teaching methods, an understanding of the background of their learners can come to their rescue. Depending on the prior knowledge of the learners, a foreign language can be taught using contrastive analysis. This technique might work well in the initial stages but then, using it excessively might lead to interference of the known language in learning the new one. The objective is to have a positive transfer of concepts from one's first language to a foreign language. At the same time, the proficiency level of the learners in their language needs to be assessed for this approach to work. The idea is not to baffle the students by bringing in concepts that exist in their language that they are possibly not even aware of, but to facilitate and smoothen the learning of a foreign language.

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