

Linguistic Narcissism, Perceived Discrimination, and the Lived Experiences of Non-Hindi Speakers in Delhi

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Abstract: Language is a fundamental marker of cultural identity, yet it often becomes a source of exclusion in multilingual societies. In India, the symbolic dominance of Hindi has produced complex hierarchies that shape access to visibility, belonging, and respect. This qualitative study explores how non-Hindi speakers experience linguistic narcissism, perceived discrimination, and identity negotiation within Delhi's Hindi-majoritarian context. Using a phenomenological design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten non-Hindi-speaking participants from diverse linguistic backgrounds, including Malayalam, Marathi, Kashmiri, Urdu, and Kannada speakers. Data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Five interrelated themes emerged: (1) linguistic identity as core selfhood; (2) navigating a Hindi-majoritarian order; (3) emotional toll of linguistic exclusion; (4) coping and resistance through adaptation and community; and (5) calls for civic empathy and linguistic justice. Participants described feeling pressured to conform linguistically, facing stereotyping and institutional disregard, and internalizing self-doubt linked to language hierarchies. Yet, they also demonstrated resilience through multilingual adaptation, community solidarity, and pride in their linguistic heritage. These findings suggest that linguistic narcissism in Delhi functions less as overt hostility and more as subtle symbolic domination embedded in everyday interactions. The study highlights the psychological dimensions of language-based exclusion and argues for greater civic respect and policy attention toward multilingual inclusivity in urban India.

Keywords: linguistic narcissism, multilingualism, discrimination, identity, qualitative research, India

In multilingual societies, language functions not merely as a medium of communication but as a powerful symbol of identity, belonging, and social hierarchy. In India, where over 1,600 languages coexist, linguistic identity remains one of the most potent expressions of culture and community (Joseph, 2004). Yet, language is also deeply entangled with politics and power. The visibility and institutional dominance of Hindi, particularly in state apparatuses, education, and national media have produced asymmetrical relations among linguistic groups. This hierarchy grants Hindi a symbolic and political privilege that extends beyond its communicative role, positioning it as a marker of "Indianness" while marginalizing non-Hindi languages and their speakers (Brass, 2011; Srivastava, 2008).

Within this context, Delhi stands as a linguistic crossroads: a city of internal migration and cultural hybridity, yet one where the dominance of Hindi subtly structures access to inclusion, visibility, and respect. For many non-Hindi speakers, especially from southern and northeastern states, everyday interactions in Delhi can reveal pressures to assimilate linguistically, to suppress their mother tongue, or to perform linguistic competence

in Hindi as a precondition for social belonging.

Scholars have long noted that dominant language groups often perceive their own language as culturally superior, more authentic, or closer to the national identity (Piller, 2016; Schiffman, 1996). Such tendencies mirror broader sociopsychological processes in which collective identity becomes a source of pride, defensiveness, and exclusion. One particularly relevant framework is collective narcissism, defined as a group's exaggerated belief in its own greatness and its hypersensitivity to perceived threats (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). When applied to language, this construct evolves into linguistic narcissism, the belief that one's language represents the most authentic, superior, or legitimate expression of national or cultural identity. Linguistic narcissism, then, captures how dominant-language speakers may both valorize their language and react defensively to linguistic diversity. This framework illuminates the subtle psychological mechanisms underlying linguistic domination, how language is not just used, but emotionally defended as a boundary of belonging.

While sociolinguistic and political analyses of language hierarchy in India are extensive, relatively little

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research explores its psychological and experiential dimensions. Most existing literature examines macro-level phenomena such as language policy, nationalism, and identity politics (Annamalai, 2010; Dua, 2014), but few studies have asked how these structures are felt in the lived experience of linguistic minorities. How do non-Hindi speakers experience their identity in a Hindi-majoritarian urban context? How do they interpret, internalize, or resist subtle linguistic hierarchies in everyday encounters? These questions remain largely unaddressed, leaving a gap between theoretical discussions of linguistic nationalism and the everyday psychological realities of multilingual life.

Delhi provides a particularly compelling setting to explore these dynamics. As India's capital, it symbolizes both national unity and linguistic hierarchy. Its urban spaces host students, migrants, and professionals from across the country, creating diverse linguistic encounters marked by negotiation and asymmetry. Here, language becomes a site of both opportunity and exclusion—where one's ability or willingness to speak Hindi can determine access to social networks, institutional resources, and even professional mobility. For non-Hindi speakers, this creates what Bourdieu (1991) might call a *linguistic market*, where certain linguistic forms carry more “symbolic capital” than others. The dominance of Hindi thus intersects with class, region, and cultural identity, producing an implicit hierarchy that shapes who feels “at home” in the capital.

Furthermore, there has been an amplification in the symbolic status of Hindi as a marker of national unity and authenticity. Policies promoting Hindi in education and administration, combined with populist discourses linking Hindi to patriotism, reinforce a monolingual ideal that marginalizes India's linguistic plurality (King, 1997; Nair, 2022). It may be hypothesized that these experiences evoke questions of linguistic justice, identity politics, and emotional resilience in the face of subtle cultural dominance.

Understanding these experiences demands a qualitative, phenomenological lens that centers participants' voices. Rather than treating language merely as a structural or political variable, this study approaches it as a lived, emotional, and identity-laden phenomenon. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with non-

Hindi speakers residing in Delhi, the research explores how individuals make sense of linguistic narcissism and how it manifests in their daily social interactions. The study seeks to reveal how perceptions of linguistic superiority, microaggressions, and pressures to assimilate influence feelings of belonging, self-esteem, and cultural continuity.

The present study thus pursues four key objectives: (1) to explore the lived experiences of non-Hindi speakers residing in a Hindi-majoritarian context in Delhi; (2) to examine perceptions and manifestations of linguistic narcissism and language-based discrimination in everyday interactions; (3) to understand how non-Hindi speakers negotiate linguistic identity and belonging;

1. What are the lived experiences of non-Hindi speakers living in Delhi as a Hindi-majoritarian urban space?
2. How do non-Hindi speakers perceive and experience linguistic narcissism and language-based discrimination in daily life?
3. How do they negotiate their linguistic identity and belonging in response to dominant language norms?
4. What emotional impacts do these experiences have, and what coping strategies do they employ?

By situating linguistic narcissism within the broader context of migration, identity, and social inclusion, this study contributes to interdisciplinary dialogues across sociolinguistics, social psychology, and cultural studies. It highlights how linguistic hierarchies in India operate not only through policy and ideology but also through lived experience and affective life. Ultimately, this paper argues that understanding language-based marginalization as a psychological phenomenon, rooted in everyday encounters can deepen our insight into the persistence of inequality and the resilience of minority identities in multilingual societies like India.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore how non-Hindi speakers experience linguistic narcissism, perceived discrimination, and identity negotiation in a Hindi-majoritarian urban context. Phenomenology was chosen because it focuses on individuals' lived experiences and

the meanings they attribute to those experiences (van Manen, 2016). This approach aligns with the study's aim to uncover how non-Hindi speakers interpret and respond to linguistic hierarchies in Delhi.

The research was guided by a constructivist epistemological stance, which assumes that meaning is co-constructed through dialogue between researcher and participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than striving for statistical generalizability, the study sought depth, contextual understanding, and emotional resonance. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit rich narratives concerning linguistic identity, inclusion, and discrimination.

Data were analyzed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). RTA was chosen for its flexibility and its emphasis on researcher reflexivity, interpretation, and engagement with the data. This framework allowed patterns of meaning to emerge inductively while maintaining sensitivity to theoretical concepts such as linguistic narcissism and perceived discrimination.

Participants

At the time of writing, ten participants were interviewed as part of a larger, ongoing qualitative project that aims to include twenty participants in total. Data collection remains in progress to ensure broader linguistic and regional representation; however, the analysis presented here captures key emergent themes that have consistently appeared across participants. This phase represents the preliminary analytical stage of the study.

Participants were non-Hindi speakers who had migrated to Delhi from various linguistic regions of India, including Kerala (Malayalam speakers), Maharashtra (Marathi speakers), Jammu & Kashmir (Kashmiri/Urdu speakers), and Karnataka (Urdu/Kannada speakers). They ranged in age from 18 to 35 years ($M = 24.7$ years) and represented diverse academic and occupational backgrounds, including university students, educators, and early-career professionals.

Inclusion criteria required that participants:

1. Primarily spoke a non-Hindi mother tongue (e.g., Malayalam, Tamil, Marathi, Kashmiri, Urdu,

Kannada);

2. Had resided in Delhi for at least one year; and
3. Reported intermediate comprehension of Hindi but limited fluency or confidence in speaking it.

A purposive and snowball sampling strategy was used. Participants were initially contacted through university student networks, language-based associations (e.g., Malayali and Marathi student groups), and professional referrals. Subsequent participants were recruited through recommendations from earlier interviewees. The sample was balanced by gender (five women, five men) and included both northern and southern linguistic minorities, providing a rich and varied dataset for cross-regional analysis.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted between November 2025 and January 2026. Each interview lasted approximately 45–70 minutes and was conducted either in person or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on participant availability.

The interview guide (see Appendix A) was designed to capture experiences related to linguistic identity, adaptation, discrimination, and emotional well-being. Questions were open-ended and exploratory, enabling participants to describe their experiences in their own words. Example questions included:

- “Can you describe how your language relates to your sense of identity?”
- “Have you ever felt pressure to speak Hindi or avoid using your mother tongue?”
- “Can you recall an experience where language affected how you were treated in Delhi?”
- “How do you cope with or respond to linguistic discomfort or exclusion?”

Probing questions were used as needed to deepen reflection and clarify meanings. Interviews were primarily conducted in English, although participants occasionally used Hindi or their mother tongue for emphasis or clarity. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. Translations were carefully reviewed to preserve semantic nuances, and pseudonyms were assigned to ensure anonymity.

Procedure and Analysis

Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage.

The analysis followed the six-phase Reflexive Thematic Analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019):

1. Familiarization: Researchers immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading transcripts, noting early patterns of meaning.
2. Generating Initial Codes: Codes were developed inductively to capture significant features of the data related to power, belonging, and identity negotiation.
3. Constructing Themes: Codes were collated into broader candidate themes that reflected shared experiential meanings, such as “Linguistic Anxiety,” “Cultural Invisibility,” and “Resistance through Adaptation.”
4. Reviewing Themes: Themes were reviewed for coherence and refined to ensure internal consistency and distinctiveness.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Themes were clearly defined and conceptually linked to the theoretical framework of linguistic narcissism and perceived discrimination.
6. Producing the Report: The analysis was written narratively, incorporating illustrative participant quotes to highlight emotional and psychological dimensions.

Because data collection is ongoing, the analysis presented in this paper represents the first phase of a larger project. This iterative process allowed early insights to shape subsequent interviews, aligning with the reflexive and evolving nature of phenomenological inquiry.

Researcher Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations

Given the interpretive nature of qualitative analysis, reflexivity was a central component of the research process. Both researchers are multilingual and have personal experience navigating Hindi-dominant educational and social environments. This insider–outsider positionality informed a nuanced understanding of participants’ narratives while also demanding critical self-awareness. Reflexive journals were maintained to document interpretive decisions, personal reactions, and analytic reflections.

Ethical integrity was upheld throughout the study. Participant confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing names and identifiable details. Data were stored securely on encrypted devices accessible only to the research team. Care was taken to ensure participants’ emotional well-being during interviews, particularly when discussing experiences of exclusion or discrimination.

Results

Table 1

Themes Identified in Linguistic Identity Narratives

Theme	Description	Illustrative Example
1. Linguistic identity as core selfhood	Language as the emotional and cultural foundation of identity	“Malayalam is the core of my identity... Hindi feels like wearing someone else’s skin.”
2. Navigating a Hindi-majoritarian order	Constant adaptation to Hindi dominance across spaces	“Government officers act like Hindi is proof you belong.”
3. Emotional Toll: Anxiety and Invisibility	Psychological strain from exclusion and linguistic insecurity.	“It triggers imposter syndrome—you start questioning if you belong.” ³

4. Coping and resistance	Building resilience through learning, community, and solidarity.	"I learned Hindi to reclaim power, not to blend in."
5. Reimagining inclusion	Calls for empathy, multilingual education, and civic respect.	"Inclusivity should be civic sense—respect every language."

Analysis of the first ten interviews revealed five interrelated themes that illuminate how non-Hindi speakers experience linguistic narcissism, perceived discrimination, and identity negotiation in Delhi's Hindi-majoritarian environment. While participants differed in their linguistic backgrounds, regions, and adaptation strategies, their narratives converged on shared emotional and psychological patterns oscillating between alienation, adaptation, resistance, and pride.

Linguistic Identity as Core Selfhood

Across participants, *language* was described as a fundamental part of the self, a source of cultural belonging and personal authenticity. For participants from Kerala and Kashmir in particular, mother tongues like Malayalam and Kashmiri were not only communication tools but emotional anchors linking them to home, family, and cultural pride.

Haseena, a law student from Kerala, reflected:

"Malayalam is the core of my identity. It's the language I think in, dream in, it's who I am. Speaking English or Hindi never feels natural; it's like borrowing someone else's skin."

Similarly, Ahammed from Kashmir emphasized that language represented cultural preservation:

"Language is how we reflect our culture... it's not just communication, it's heritage. To adjust somewhere else shouldn't mean forgetting our roots."

Participants often associated language with dignity and continuity. The act of speaking their mother tongue even in private or digital spaces was described as a quiet assertion of selfhood in a city that often demanded linguistic conformity. This theme underscores how linguistic identity functions as an emotional lifeline, shaping both self-concept and social positioning. The psychological salience of language intensified

participants' sensitivity to exclusion or mockery based on speech.

Navigating a Hindi-Majoritarian Order

A pervasive thread across narratives was the constant negotiation required to survive in a Hindi-dominant city. Participants described daily encounters where their limited fluency in Hindi was interpreted as ignorance or inferiority, reinforcing subtle hierarchies of belonging.

Haseena recounted:

"At university, I tried to communicate in English, but professors and classmates would lose interest or switch back to Hindi. One professor even said he couldn't teach in English because some students didn't know it. So I became invisible in class."

Others echoed how linguistic dominance extends beyond classrooms into bureaucratic and public spaces. A participant noted:

"Government offices and officers have a superiority... they won't communicate in English. It's as if knowing Hindi is proof that you belong."

Shreyasi, from Maharashtra, shared similar experiences:

"In Delhi, everyone assumes Hindi is the natural language. If you don't speak it fluently, they think you're either arrogant or incompetent. Even as a business owner, I was judged on my accent."

These accounts reveal how linguistic narcissism manifests as symbolic entitlement, the implicit assumption that Hindi represents the authentic or normative Indian experience. The social expectation to accommodate Hindi reflects an unequal linguistic economy in which other languages must constantly justify their presence.

Emotional Toll (Anxiety, Invisibility, and Internalized Inferiority)

The psychological consequences of navigating this linguistic hierarchy were pronounced. Participants described experiences of linguistic anxiety, self-doubt, and cultural invisibility, particularly in early phases of migration.

Haseena's reflection captures this tension vividly:

"These linguistic barriers have deeply impacted my well-being. It triggers imposter syndrome. You start questioning if you even belong in the space you're studying or working in."

Another participant from Kerala recalled:

"When I first came to Delhi, I was constantly afraid to speak up. The thought 'I should learn Hindi or I'll never fit in' was engraved in my mind."

Even those with functional fluency in Hindi noted feeling linguistically insecure. The emotional burden was intensified by ridicule or stereotyping. As one participant said:

"People mock your accent and label you as 'South Indian.' It's not meant to be cruel, but it reminds you that you're an outsider."

In contrast, participants fluent in English like Huda reported fewer barriers, suggesting that English functions as a protective linguistic capital, softening discrimination while reinforcing another hierarchy between "educated" English-speakers and others.

This theme highlights how language-based exclusion operates as emotional labor. Constant self-monitoring, translation, and accommodation drain psychological energy and reproduce subtle feelings of inferiority and detachment.

Coping, Resistance, and Community Belonging

Despite experiences of marginalization, participants described adaptive strategies and resistance practices that helped restore agency. A dominant pattern was seeking comfort within linguistic communities, peer groups, student associations, and regional networks that provided

cultural validation.

Haseena shared:

"I've normalized this discomfort as part of my reality. What keeps me going is the Malayali community here. They're my support system, my reminder that I'm not alone."

Shreyas offered another form of adaptation, learning as resistance:

"When I realized people judged me for my Hindi, I decided to master it. I studied media channels and practiced until I could blend in. Now I use that confidence as power."

For some, language learning was not assimilation but a strategic tool of empowerment, enabling smoother navigation of institutions while retaining pride in one's roots.

Others reframed discomfort through empathy and philosophical acceptance. Ahammed reflected:

"Discrimination exists everywhere; you can't escape it. I try to see it as part of human limitation, not just language. The best I can do is stay open and learn."

This theme reveals the agency within adaptation, how linguistic minorities balance between self-preservation and pragmatic accommodation. The emotional burden of exclusion thus coexists with acts of resilience, collective solidarity, and self-determination.

Reimagining Linguistic Inclusion and Justice

When asked how multilingual urban spaces could become more inclusive, participants converged on a clear critique: the issue is not lack of awareness but lack of civic empathy.

Hamna emphasized:

"People in universities know Hindi isn't everyone's language. The problem isn't ignorance, it's the absence of respect. Linguistic inclusivity should be seen as basic civic sense."

Huda similarly called for systemic reforms:

“Inclusivity requires awareness and education. English can act as a bridge language, but we also need translators, exposure programs, and more representation for other Indian languages.”

Shreyasi proposed a more pragmatic solution:

“Our education policy should promote multilingualism as a skill, not as ideology. Like Europe, students should learn multiple regional languages early. Making Hindi mandatory only widens the divide.”

Collectively, participants articulated a vision of linguistic justice rooted in mutual respect, policy reform, and cultural exchange. Their responses reflect a desire not for linguistic dominance but for linguistic coexistence, a recognition that every language carries equal emotional and cultural weight.

Taken together, these themes reveal that linguistic narcissism in Delhi operates less through overt hostility and more through symbolic normalcy, the everyday assumption that Hindi represents national authenticity. Non-Hindi speakers internalize this dominance through experiences of invisibility, adjustment pressure, and emotional fatigue.

Yet, their narratives also demonstrate resilience and redefinition: participants reinterpret linguistic competence as empowerment, transform exclusion into solidarity, and frame multilingualism as strength rather than deficit.

The findings therefore extend the concept of linguistic narcissism beyond political discourse into the psychological realm, as a lived experience marked by belonging, exclusion, and the emotional negotiation of self in relation to dominant language norms.

Discussion

This study sought to explore how non-Hindi speakers experience linguistic narcissism, perceived discrimination, and identity negotiation within Delhi's Hindi-majoritarian environment. The preliminary findings reveal that while participants occupy diverse

linguistic and regional positions, their experiences converge on shared emotional, psychological, and social dynamics: identity assertion, adaptation, exclusion, and resilience.

The findings illuminate how linguistic narcissism, the belief in the superiority or authenticity of a dominant language manifests not only institutionally but also in everyday interpersonal encounters. Participants' accounts suggest that Hindi's symbolic dominance operates as a form of *collective linguistic entitlement*, where fluency in Hindi becomes an unspoken criterion for belonging. This reflects Golec de Zavala et al.'s (2009) concept of collective narcissism, in which a group's inflated self-importance fuels defensiveness against perceived linguistic or cultural threats. In Delhi, this defensiveness is subtle yet pervasive: Hindi is positioned as “naturally Indian,” while other languages are treated as peripheral or ornamental.

At the psychological level, these dynamic produces what scholars' term linguistic marginalization, a form of minority stress that affects individuals' confidence and sense of belonging (Sue et al., 2007; Williams & Mohammed, 2009). Participants described experiences of linguistic anxiety, self-censorship, and emotional exhaustion when navigating educational and bureaucratic spaces that privileged Hindi. These findings echo broader research on symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991), where language hierarchies are internalized as self-doubt and silence. Notably, even participants with English fluency recognized that linguistic inclusion remained conditional on Hindi performance, illustrating how social power is reproduced through normative language expectations.

At the same time, participants actively resisted and redefined their linguistic identities. Their coping strategies, ranging from community solidarity to self-directed language learning, reflect agency rather than passive assimilation. The existence of regional associations and peer networks provided emotional safety and validation, transforming collective marginality into cultural pride. These practices align with emerging research on linguistic resilience, which views multilingualism as a site of empowerment rather than deficit (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). Thus, while linguistic narcissism constrains belonging, it also catalyzes acts of self-assertion and identity reconstruction

among minority speakers.

Conceptually, the study extends the notion of linguistic narcissism beyond political discourse into psychological and phenomenological terrain. It demonstrates that linguistic hierarchy is not experienced solely as policy or ideology but as *affective reality*, felt in the body, through shame, fatigue, and resistance. These findings underscore the importance of studying language not only as a cultural symbol but as a lived psychological phenomenon embedded in everyday emotion, interaction, and belonging.

From a social and policy standpoint, the participants' call for empathy and inclusivity highlights the need for linguistic justice frameworks in education, governance, and civic life. As several participants observed, awareness of India's multilingualism already exists; what remains lacking is civic respect and institutional accommodation. Universities and workplaces in Hindi-majoritarian settings can foster inclusion through multilingual signage, interpretation services, and training programs that sensitize communities to linguistic diversity.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the small sample size ($N = 10$), while appropriate for phenomenological research, limits the generalizability of the results. The study prioritizes depth and meaning over representativeness.

Second, participants were primarily young adults and students or early-career professionals. Experiences of linguistic exclusion may vary across age groups, occupational sectors, and socioeconomic contexts, which were not fully captured here.

Third, interviews were largely conducted in English, which may have constrained the expression of emotional and culturally embedded meanings tied to participants' mother tongues.

Finally, the study centers exclusively on non-Hindi speakers' perspectives. While this was intentional, it does not capture how linguistic dominance is perceived or reproduced by Hindi-majoritarian speakers.

Future research could expand this work by including larger and more diverse samples across age, class, and occupational groups. Comparative studies across different Indian cities would help examine how linguistic narcissism varies by regional and political context.

Mixed-methods approaches combining qualitative insights with quantitative measures of perceived discrimination or linguistic anxiety could further strengthen psychological analysis. Additionally, examining Hindi-majoritarian perspectives would provide a more relational understanding of linguistic power. Finally, future studies could explore institutional and policy interventions, such as multilingual education and language-inclusive practices, to assess their impact on belonging and well-being in multilingual urban spaces.

Conclusion

In sum, this preliminary analysis reveals that linguistic narcissism in Delhi manifests as both structural dominance and subtle everyday exclusion, shaping the emotional and identity experiences of non-Hindi speakers. Yet within this hierarchy, individuals reclaim power through adaptation, solidarity, and pride in their mother tongues.

By framing linguistic hierarchy as a psychological phenomenon, this study bridges sociolinguistic and social-psychological perspectives, highlighting the emotional dimensions of language-based marginalization. As ongoing data collection expands, future analyses will deepen understanding of how language, power, and belonging intersect across regions.

Ultimately, this research affirms that linguistic inclusivity is not merely a matter of policy or translation, it is an ethical and emotional imperative central to the health of a multilingual democracy.

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