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CAPTIONING FIGHTS ILLITERACY IN INDIA

The number of people who are functionally illiterate in India varies according to who is doing the measuring, but however you measure it, it is a major problem. Estimates suggest at least 300 million people cannot usefully read.

So how is the seemingly insurmountable problem being tackled? Through the power of song.

The solution is to use the amazing popularity of Bollywood movies and karaoke to get people reading again. The project is being undertaken by the Indian Institute of Management in partnership with national television, the Indian Government and a host of corporate sponsors and foundations.

The technique is very simple. Same Language Subtitling (SLS) is used to provide on-screen written versions of the song lyrics in popular Bollywood movies. The project offers 10 different community languages and through the national broadcaster transmits these as part of regular television programming. In villages throughout India, people sit around the communal television and sing along to the movie, subtly improving their reading skills along the way.

The project has focused mainly on people with some minimal reading skills, aiming to bring them up to practical literacy levels, measured by being able to read a story or fill out basic information in a form.

The results tracked over 5 years show the technique does work. Participation in SLS more than doubled the percentage of children who became good readers and halved the percentage of children who remained illiterate. Essentially, reading skills acquired in school are simultaneously practised at home, leading to much better readers.



Watching songs with Same Language Subtitling (SLS) in the Gulbai Tekra slum in Ahmedabad. (Photo: PlanetRead)

The impact of SLS on children is also found in adult illiterates, although less pronounced. After 5 years, while only 3% illiterate adults became good readers in the no-SLS group, 12% became good readers in the SLS group.

The program is not expensive to run by world standards. For US\$1 (or the price of a cup of coffee), 5,000 Hindi speakers can have 30 minutes of reading practice a week for one year.

As a bonus for the commercially-minded television executives, the project has even delivered increased audience ratings.

For more information on the project:
<http://www.planetread.org/>

IS VOICE RECOGNITION TAKING OVER THE WORLD?

Voice recognition is where a captioner 'respeaks' the dialogue of a newsreader, sports commentator or other live presenter, and machine translation software (usually based on Dragon Naturally Speaking or IBM's Via Voice) turns the revoicing into captions. The captioner uses various verbal commands to format and punctuate the captions. Typically, the time delay is a few seconds and on par with other techniques such as stenocaptioning.

The use of voice recognition for live captioning has spread incredibly over the last few years and is now the main production technique, certainly in the English-speaking world. However, there are factors which are slowing its spread into other languages. Some of these are short-term barriers, others seem more problematic.

In English-speaking countries the main focus is on training more voice captioners and refining techniques to allow them to be used on ever more complex captioning work (such as more than one speaker or where the subject matter is broader and more complex). Alternative uses (and thus income streams for access companies) include the use of voice captioning for meeting and conference work.