



Indian English: Some Provocations



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Abstract :

There are many *Englishes* found across the world. Apart from the native variety of English, i. e. British English, the registers of English have had their distinctive models established per the geographic variance. Even American English has been taken for a native model of English, though it could be a matter of revaluation. Moreover, there are many countries of the world, post-imperial and others, which have lent a space for occupation of the English language. For example, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, etc. have preferred English as the language of their discourse in every walk of life and have maintained a distinct variety of their own each. As India happened to be, mostly, a British-colonial country, the seeds of English were, of course, sown in here. However, given the current standing of English in India, one could experience that there is a lot of confusion about naming *exact Indian English*. Nobody could possibly point the distinct register of Indian English. English around India differs to a large degree when dealt with on the regional grounds, first, and on that of use of the models next. For

instance, the nationals from Indian metropolises look to have hybridised English as they form, in their communication in English— an admixture of British, American, Australian, and at times African, English(es) so far as the patterns of vocabulary and pronunciation are concerned. There is, no doubt, an inevitable addition of native terms and words to that. Also, in case there are certain grammatical or normative lacunae in their communication— spoken or written, the certain speakers tend to vehemently state that theirs is a mode of Indian English. It probably goes beyond one's own perception as to gather whether such a response is the corollary of the speaker's loyalty to linguistic Indianness or it is a mere excuse on their part. This would lead to a controversy, yet the issue remains: Is there a **clear** case of Indian English?

Taking into consideration the aforesaid issue, the paper offers an attempt to delve deep into nature and possibility of a variety called Indian English.

Keywords : Indian English, register, grammar, pronunciation, MTI.

Research Paper :

When I introduced a paper at an international congress on grammar held in Aurangabad, under the title *Is There a Case of Indian English?*, the eminent scholars, having diligently worked on Linguistics, from among the audience flocked to my presentation so vehemently, to resist it of course, that it reminded me of the occasion when Ted Hughes was taken to task by his critics at the publication of his *The Hawk in the Rain* (so was I told). To my great surprise, a teacher of mine, whom I revere much, who was always unequivocal at dictating to us, me in particular: *American English is but a slight variation from British English*, also took exception to my

paper. The renowned scholars from Sweden, Hong Kong and Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi respectively, especially Prof. Christian Matthiessen, did also attempt to change my perception. Moreover, with due respect to them all it should be stated that, nothing could stop my thesis from becoming unwavering. This is how a state of affairs was.

David Crystal, a British linguist, relates an interesting story of a deep-rooted aversion of the north Indians to English:

A few years ago in India, where a march supporting Hindi and opposing English was seen on world television: most of the banners were in Hindi, but one astute marcher carried a prominent sign which enabled the voice of his group to reach much further around the world than would otherwise have been possible. His sign read: '**Death to English**' (Language Revolution 12).

The foregoing quote clarifies it that it is hardly possible to part company with English in India, however hard one tries. 'In India', says Crystal, 'there are probably now more speakers of English than in the whole of Britain and the USA combined' (24). He also adds that since politics, economics, the press, advertising, broadcasting international travel, education, and communications are the areas under dominance of English, English would function a centripetal force so far. Seeing ratio of the English speakers— especially that of the nationals of commonwealth countries— around the world, it seems extremely difficult to banish English at least from the contemporary scenes of the world. Even Mulk Raj Anand, a well-known Indian English novelist, has strongly advocated the use of English in India.

Although article 343 of the constitution of India hypothesised ceasing of English after fifteen years since the commencement of the constitution, the dominance of English in Indian context is redoubtable today. Moreover, the questions are: *Which English do the Indians speak?* Which grammar do the Indian speakers of English follow? Is there a specific register of Indian English? Which pronunciation do the Indian speakers follow? Finally, is there a clear case of Indian English?

So far as one sees, there is no recognised or uniform model of Indian English, at least I am not alive to it. There have been endeavours to set one yet the possibility of it has remained too distant. Sinha and Nihlani did exert their combine effort to compare general Indian English to British English in the book *British English and General Indian English*. In it, they have given a list of a fair number of words and that of the usage from the perspective of English used in the Indian matrix. However, it seems that they are little referred to by the writers making the area of Indian English. It is worthwhile, still, to note an example on usage from the book— *The police were awarded bribe by the thieves*— which is attended in due course herein. Jyoti Sanyal, a Bangalore-based journalist has produced a book entitled *Indlish: The Book for Every English-Speaking Indian* in which he has explored the concepts like Indlish (Indian English), Hindlish (North Indian English), Benglish (Bengali English), Tamlish (Tamil English), etc. He is basically inclined towards annihilation of Victorian English which has become archaic, hence tedious or drab, and has affected Indian way of English. He holds Indian journalists and newspaper editors solely responsible for impoverishing English in India:

Nothing so well illustrates the failings of Indian English as our English-language papers. Every day, these papers prove that we haven't yet begun using English the way all languages are meant to be used: for exchange of ideas and thoughts, for everyday give and take. English for us remains a language that serves commerce, law, official dealings and administration. To understand where we go wrong, we have only to contrast the clarity, ease and flair in our regional-language dailies with the fuddy-duddy ways of our English-language papers. (95)

To Sanyal, the components of Indian English are commercialese, officialise, legalese, archaisms, and unidiomatic expressions. Sanyal also experiments with Dickensian language (266, 268), in David Copperfield, to prove how the brevity of expression could have helped Micawber, a character from the very text, to make it plain and simple. In fact, Sanyal is more focussed on plainspeak than what he terms *circumlocution*. His book has been taken by Martin Cutts for the last hope for reform of English in India.

The Oxford University Press has also added a supplement, comprising Indian Words, to its fifth edition of advanced learner's dictionary but the idea does not seem to have fructified as the words listed have not been practised in either form of communication at the general level. The writers of fiction like R. K. Narayan desperately want the "Indian brand of English". There is a website, <http://www.amritt.com>, which is meant for helping the business people to communicate with India. Moreover, it carries an insufficient content of words from the vantage point of enlightening the non-Indian speakers of English. Besides, there are certain shortcomings it contains.

There have been various remarks and reactions to English so far, in Indian academies. For instance, certain academics seem to strongly resist the idea either of British or American English and emphasise the necessity of Indian English. Nothing could be seen objectionable to this, though, given the point of a distinct linguistic identity. Aside from this, one should take it for granted that however hard the Indians press the demand for native register of English, they would hardly come to a concrete entity. As there is cultural as well as regional diversity across India, English has become a language subject to regional diversity in particular. For example, in the states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, one finds that the citizens of both the states use American accent.

In the north, especially in Delhi, an admixture of British and American accents could be experienced and in a state like Maharashtra there is a stance of indeterminacy over the English accent. There are a number of spoken English classes across the country that could possibly struggle to explain the issue of uniformity of English.

If one undergoes the linguistic milieu of the Indian metropolises, megalopolises, or conurbations like Mumbai, one finds that the communicators of English there hybridise the language such a way that the general auditor of them would find it quite difficult to decipher the register to a great extent. For example, a *Bombayete* or *Mumbaiah* would tend to express a sentence: He is not only a techno-savvy but also a *nerd*. In the given statement, *nerd* is a word derived from African English. It is also witnessed on the screen of television that the youngsters produce the statements like: *He's a beaut* in which *beaut* belongs to Australian and New Zealanders' English; it is part of North American English as well. There are certain informal or offensive terms used by such speakers, for example, 'hiya buddy', 'obnoxious grass', etc. that belong to the Australian register. Apart from this, there is a burden of code switching that the auditor has to face. The speakers above mix about three languages together: English, Hindi and at times Marathi which leaves the listener befuddled. If such circumstances take their own course, how could one distinguish Indian English out of that?

When the issue of pronunciation is to be tackled, it receives a lot of criticism. The general opinion forms a sense of dissent in the case of following a model. Nevertheless, the irony is that most of the people subscribing to so an opposition look to have been obsessed with the standard pronunciation. It is probably a more challenging fabric of English communication for the Indian speakers. For example, the basic obstacle they are faced with for the most part has been the manner and place of articulation of the sounds like dentals, labio-dentals, long monophthongs, and diphthongs— the triphthongs are yet to add to the problem since not in vogue as of now. Maintaining length while articulating the long monophthongs, i. e., / i: α: u: /, and diphthongs, /eɪ, aɪ, ɔɪ, əʊ/ becomes a matter of trouble for many Indian speakers. They also struggle to make proper and precise use of the *lips* and position of *teeth* in the articulation process. As a result, the listener from a native culture finds it difficult to cope with such communicative hurdles and there appears a possibility of miscommunication. Some, out of a sense of frustration, say: Why should we dance to the tune of native pronunciation when meaning is basically important? Here I would like to share two experiences, in this regard, that simply thrilled me and called for urgent attention to the model pronunciation which I do my level best to follow to overcome the barrier of technicality. I do not mean to be specialized in it though. I apologise for my subjectivity.

1. When I served in Mumbai for a term, I had some very useful and ever-memorable experiences as regards English. I wanted to buy a musical instrument called *Iwa Walkman* stereo cassette player. Accordingly, I paid a visit to a music shop there and having pointed the word *bass*, I pronounced it as /ba:s/ instead of /beɪs/. A high school-goer sales boy in the shop responded to it: Oh sir, it is not /ba:s/ but /beɪs/. I felt crestfallen realising that a teenager knew the exact pronunciation of the word whereas I, even as a professional, did not know it.
2. As a paper setter, when I matched the /æ/ of *mass* with that in *cash*, I was bitterly criticised by my senior as: 'Your pronunciation is poor, improve it!'
3. When I was a student of under graduate class at Milind College, Aurangabad, I happened to see a French tourist at Makai Gate of the city. He said: I want to visit the *thick* market of Aurangabad. It took me about five minutes to get at his adjective as I could not follow the technicality of the dental /θ/ and misunderstood it as /s/ finally the word being *sick*.

Since that day I came determined to follow the best possible technical accuracy of pronunciation letting alone my critics and detractors.

It is generally observed that the Indians well-versed in English, especially the elite class, have been so conscious about maintenance of standard accent of English in their communication. Therefore, they look down upon those missing that standard. Even the highly educated class of Indian academics is very often seen emphasise the issue of MTI, i. e. mother tongue influence. If there is an honest will to generate a model of Indian English, then why discuss the issues like MTI on a negative line and why look down upon those that could not follow the standard model of English?

Coming to the book of Sinha and Nihlani. The book comprises some sentences, to which the authors do not subscribe— that could possibly fetch in a sense of conundrum as to reflect if that could be a way to create the sentences. It would not be worthwhile to discuss many of them herein; even a single example would suffice the need. A statement reads therein: *The police were awarded bribes by the thieves*. The statement has one think if *award* and *bribe* can go together although the police and thieves can. The law of *Ethical Linguistics* would most probably not permit such a combination, though General Linguistics would, since the former word presents a socially acceptable moral association and the latter an equal amoral one. If such statements could be taken appropriate as part of a distinct register called Indian English, it would possibly be like leaving a universal track of forming an imitable register. The Australian, Canadian, African, etc. registers have had their own commendable varieties.

Another issue with the structure of vocabulary of English, spoken and written forms, has been the use of the *stative* verb. The books on English grammar like *A University Grammar* by Quirk and Greenbaum, *A Student's*

Grammar, and *A Comprehensive Grammar* by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik especially point out the verbs that fall in the stative category and the grammarians seem to recommend that the stative verbs be not used in the progressive form in general. However, it appears a different fact in the context of India. The progressive form of any verb has been the greatest frequency should it mean the use of a class of words in English communication in India. Presumably India is the only country in which the stative verb, mostly related to the inner perception and cognition, has been used in the progressive form to a massive extent. Even though the verb is not used so in the native languages of India, it is interesting to note that it is in English.

There are certain grammatical nuances too that carry indeterminacy. For instance, a statement like 'I would like ask a question to you' could not identify whether the preposition emphasised in the foregoing statement is symbolic of a zeitgeist. There is another trend of redundancy found among the Indian speakers of English, that is, the two synonyms— even and also— have been used in the same sentence at the beginning and end respectively as in: '*Even* you can go *also*'. The collocations like '*Very* good morning!' and '*What* is your *good* name?' etc. are part of the redundancy (the majority of people from the non-established backdrop do not carry *good* or *respectable* names in India which is a bitter reality as well as a different chapter). A repeat of a certain word is found as well in the same statement: 'He is an officer *also* and a rich person *also*'. Such subtleties of English have been greatly present in "The Very Indian Poems" by Nissim Ezekiel. Most of the time, Ezekiel has been assessed on an unwelcome note. Though a poem like "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa .T. S." gives way to comic elements, it, otherwise, asks the readers to reflect on linguistic grounds. If read or assessed dispassionately, the poem is sure to yield an affirmative linguistic result. Those that endeavoured to analyse the poem also met some linguistic accidents of their own in the vein of grammar.

Another point at issue, so far as the use of English in India is concerned, has remained of defining the King's English or Queen's English. The concept does not seem to have gone well with the people in India and hence has attracted general disapproval and humour. Bernard Lamb has produced a write-up under the title, "God save the Queen's English: Our language is under threat from ignorance, inverted snobbery and deliberate 'dumbing down'" (Web 07.10.2010). He defines the language of the queen as:

The Queen's English is correct, conventional, standard British English. It is the most authoritative and easily understood form of the language. One finds it in non-fiction and fiction, in textbooks in almost all subjects, in newspapers, in government and business documents, and in public and private correspondence.

If the Queen's English is discovered in the major media, and easily understood, it means that it is not only free from the royal obligation but also adoptable. What Lamb adds further merits heed—

The Queen's English, with correct grammar and vocabulary, can be spoken in many accents, say Indian or Australian, and in regional British accents such as those used in Birmingham, Newcastle or Glasgow. There are extremely good users of the Queen's English in Sweden, Sri Lanka and Singapore, and very bad users of it in London, Oxford and Cambridge. There is much ignorance, carelessness, inverted snobbery and deliberate "dumbing down", as if bad English is more socially acceptable than good English.

As ignorance, carelessness, inverted snobbery and deliberate dumbing down have badly hit the standard form of English in the United Kingdom, it should not sound an exaggeration if stated that the Indians have also had a similar setback. The media, advertisements, film, etc. linguistically influence the language and its speakers which is also a reason for the change of perspective of the people.

It is well-known a fact that the aspirants to career that wish to go abroad have to clear the tests like TOEFL and IELTS failing which they are most likely to miss their opportunity of the desired career prospects. Even the multinational companies in India do not scruple to recruit the candidates that do not fit into the settled frame of English which makes the candidates lose a better job opportunity— I personally came across one such candidate. To say that Hindi would rule the world, as is heard of in common parlance, seems an overoptimistic call, at least today. Therefore, it may be given a consideration that there is a dire need for such a model of English in India that could enrich the academia first and the rest of the fields later.

The overall coetaneous status of English in India puts forth an implication that though the brand of Indian English is fervidly desired and equally aimed at, there is not a perfect or concrete model of it available. A universally acknowledged distinct dictionary of Indian English is not born yet. The Indians are, what Dr B. R. Ambedkar used to emphatically say, a heterogeneous mass of people given to diverse cultures. If Indian English were to exist at the top as a model language for Indians, it is sure to get diversified downwards. It is because every state of India has a different regional language and culture. The claim that the Indians are still possessed of the colonial mentality does not efface the fact that there is no complete replacement of the colonial language. Therefore, there could be the best possible addendum of the local dialects— sounds, lexis, grammatical categories, etc., filiated with the available practised corpus of English which may sound hybridised on the one hand yet would carry a lot of scope for the distinctiveness on the other.

However hard one presses it that there is no necessity of a standard form of English which, one does reiterate, should be used for a practical purpose, one could hardly deny that a formal *langue* is a must too. Quoting Bernard Lamb, again, would be a good case in point:

Without accepted rules and conventions, and agreement on the meanings of words, there would be linguistic anarchy and lack of understanding. The standard form of a language is the one which all people should be able to use and understand, wherever they come from, although they may prefer local variants for local communication, such as regional and ethnic versions.

To conclude, there is in theory an absolute case of Indian English; however, a practical, distinctive and concrete one is yet to take place. Given the overall research work going on in the aforesaid area, and a special attention being administered to it by the lexicons of Oxford Press, etc. it seems that a clear case of Indian English is to transpire soon.

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