Indian English - A National Model

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Abstract

India is currently home to one of the world's largest English-speaking communities, in a context where the language is increasingly seen as a gateway to the world. Given the plurality of the country's social and linguistic landscape, however, a significant amount of the population does not speak or have access to the language. The impact of colonization has traditionally made Standard British English the model to be followed in the educational context, although it does not reflect the local culture. This paper advocates the use of Indian English as the national model, due to a set of unique lexical, grammatical, phonological and discourse features that would allow it to act as both a lingua franca within the country and on the international stage.

Keywords: India, Indian English, lingua franca

Introduction

The English language has increasingly played a significant role in India since the early days of colonization and it currently acts as "its lingua franca and 'window on the world'" (Mehrotra, 2003, p. 19). In spite of an overreliance on Standard British English as a plausible model, the emergence of a local variety, commonly referred to as Indian English, reflects the impact of its socio-cultural background and setting. It is characterised by the incorporation of distinct lexical, grammatical, phonological and discourse features. This paper argues that such elements, which Indian English has acquired through "indigenization" (Kachru, 1990), has endowed the language variety with a unique nature and the consequent ability to be used as a national model, rather than a set of deviations from a native target model, as it has often been described (Domange, 2015). It would thus be capable of acting as a national lingua franca in a country marked by linguistic diversity (Sirsa & Redford, 2013) while being able to interact internationally, echoing English-speaking communities' call for a universally intelligible medium to rely on (Crystal, 1988).

The paper shall first delve into the historical background of the current topic, by focusing on the nature and role of the English language in India, particularly in the aftermath of the country's independence in 1947. It will then ponder on the claims inherent in the quest for Indian English, whose adoption as a model must be based on the acceptability by its speakers (Kachru, 1982). This will lead to an exploration of its four language systems, namely, lexis, grammar, phonology and discourse, via the provision of specific examples to further discuss the viability of the use of the variety as a national model, based on the underlying assumption that it is “a language in its own right” (Kachru, 1986, p. 31).

The nature of English in India

English is currently the second most widely spoken language in India (Vijatalakshmi & Babu, 2014), reportedly one of the world’s most multilingual countries (Graddol, 2010). Despite its status as an associate language, alongside Hindi, the official language (Crystal, 2003), the importance of English stems from its use as a tool for intrastate and interstate communication, thereby acting as a bridge with other countries. It is seen as a “route to power, prestige and the riches” (Turner, 1997, p. 159), purportedly representing “better education, better culture and higher intellect” (Vijayalakshmi & Babu, 2014, p. 1). It has provided the country with administrative cohesiveness (Singh & Kumar, 2014) and has acted as a lingua franca between speakers of different local languages, providing “stable linguistic threads for unity” (Kachru, 1986, p. 31). It has also played a major role in a myriad of fields, currently being used in tourism, government administration, education, the armed forces, business and the media (Crystal, 2003), in a context where films were broadcast exclusively in English until the early 1990s (Vijayalakshmi & Babu, 2014).

English, which Kachru (1976) calls a “transplanted language”, was brought to the Indian subcontinent in the 17th century by the East India Company, substantiated by the Charter of December 31, 1600, which granted merchants from London a monopoly on trade with India and the East (Crystal, 2003). The linguist distinguishes between three phases in the introduction of bilingualism: the first, initiated around 1614 by Christian missionaries, the second, which involved locals’ willingness to adopt English as an additional means of communication, and the third, involving Indian educational policy which opposed the anglicists and the orientalists (Kachru, 1990). The British Raj, which lasted from 1765 to 1947, ultimately “established English firmly as the medium of instruction and administration” (Kachru, 1990, p. 35).

As Patra (2016) asserts, British English played a significant role in the teaching of English as a foreign language in several countries before the Second World War. In India, British policy entailed a willingness to create a class that mirrored the colonizers’ frame of mind, as substantiated by the saying, “Indians in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions and morals and intellect” (Macaulay, 1835). This involved the opening of schools and universities based on British models, which embraced the hegemony of British language and culture, in an attempt to fuel employment amongst young Indians (Vijayalakshmi & Babu, 2014; Tully, 1997) as well as to promote English literature and science, as made clear by the Governor General, William Bentinck (Tully, 1997). It was in 1835, in fact, that English education received its final approval, with Lord Macalay advocating the substitution of

Sanskrit and Persian for English as the medium of instruction (Vijayalakshmi & Babu, 2014). The foundation of universities in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, whose adoption of English as the primary means of instruction, showed the “earliest efforts towards the Englishization of India” (Kachru, 1986, p. 31).

While American English has increasingly become the model in what Kachru (1982) once termed the “expanding circle”, British English as a standard variety for language teaching and use is still unparalleled in Commonwealth countries where it is learned as a second language (Mehrotra, 2003; Patra, 2016). In India, a recent study shows that 70% of respondents think British English is the best for their country and support the claim for a local variety heavily influenced by the so-called Received Pronunciation and by the standards set by Oxford. This mirrors Kachru’s (1983) contention that “Indians normally would not identify themselves as members of the Indian English speech community” (p. 73), opting for British English instead. Interviewees from the survey prefer writers such as Tolkien in a context where colonial English pervades the educational context (Hohenthal, 1998).

Graddol (2010) believes that the English language has “historically been a key part of the mechanism of exclusion” (p. 120), echoing earlier claims made by Mahatma Gandhi (1910), who famously declared that English-speaking Indians are responsible for ‘enslaving’ their country. Often seen as a means of inclusion nowadays (Graddol, 2010), the language still acts as a dividing force in the Indian society (Patra, 2016; Singh & Kumar, 2014), with some people viewing it as a burden and others as a liberation (Graddol, 2010). This appears to be substantiated by Tully’s (1997) earlier claim with regard to the elitist nature of the language, which leaves a large portion of the local population uneducated, thereby purportedly promoting “the snobbery of the English-speaking élite” (p. 162) and causing “social and educational oppression” (Trudgill, 1995, p. 316).

Divisions also pervade the use of the language itself, as suggested by a respondent in the aforementioned survey, according to whom English is used primarily to express ideas inherent in official communication rather than feelings and emotions (Hohenthal, 1998). This contributes to what Turner (1997) calls “the suppression of Indian thought” (p. 157), which in turn echoes Kachru’s (1986) claim that anti-English groups appear to display two types of loyalties, namely an emotional attachment to Hindi or a regional language and a “pragmatic attachment with English” (p. 32). English has thus been referred to as a ‘library language’ (Indira, 2003) owing to the manner in which it has been taught, which have long been based on traditional texts (Turner, 1997), purportedly preventing users from communicating effectively in the workplace. Such findings prompt one to ponder on whether a variety willing to embrace users’ local culture is more appropriate than one that inhibits it, while still maintaining its essence. After all, in spite of its colonial legacy, “English connects Indians less to the past than to the future” (Patra, 2016, p. 256).

The quest for Indian English

With over 23 million users, India was already the third largest English-speaking nation in the 1980s, after the United States and the United Kingdom (Kachru, 1986). Controversial evidence persists with regard to its current number of speakers. While Graddol (2010) asserts that “not enough people in India speak English after all” (p. 9), it has been claimed that it hosts the world’s second largest English-speaking population, owing to its increasingly large population, with Patra (2016) going further and suggesting that the language is being used “by more people in India than in any other country” (p. 256). According to Crystal (2003), evidence suggests that the number of English language users oscillates between a fifth and a third, the latter being at least able to hold a conversation, which would amount to over 330 million speakers, in a country that is home to more than a billion citizens.

Mehortra (2003) asserts that an international language such as English “cannot be bound by a single standard or be loyal to a single culture” (p. 24), particularly when considering the fact that, as Crystal (1988) once pointed out, “British English is now, numerically speaking, a minority dialect, compared with American, or even Indian English” (p. 10). Tully (1997) believes that, in order to cast aside its elitist nature, English “must be taught in an Indian manner and it must be linked to India as well as to international culture, and not to an archaic concept of British culture” (p. 162). This alludes to a process known as “indianization”, which reflects the impact of Indian languages on English, whose innovations occur both consciously and unconsciously to “functionally adapt it to the local milieu” (Kachru, 1986, p. 32) and is particularly important in an educational context where teachers are local speakers whose background often displays an array of linguistic resources. As Patra (2014, p. 3) contends, the language “would not be taught solely by the native speakers of English in many nations”. This would mirror the Portuguese-speaking educational context, where Brazilian Portuguese is taught and used in Brazil, instead of European Portuguese.

The Dynamic Model for word Englishes, introduced by Schneider (2007), distinguishes between five distinct stages inherent in the development of new varieties of English:

- Phase 1 – Foundation
- Phase 2 – Exo-normative stabilization
- Phase 3 – Nativization
- Phase 4 – Endo-normative stabilization
- Phase 5 - Differentiation

The first phase involves the foundation of a mutually understandable variety, entailing phonological adjustments between settlers and the indigenous population. The second one implies morphological, lexical and syntactic changes, whilst the third stage entails significant variation in terms of lexis, grammar and phonology. The fourth one, marked by increased homogeneity, involves decreased tension owing to the weakening or disappearance of the foreign settlers. The fifth stage, on the other hand, allows for local linguistic diversity (Schneider, 2007). While the author believes that Indian English is at stage 3, Mukherjee (2007) believes it is at stage 4, primarily due to the end of British rule in 1947.

In this context, Indian English has been described as a ‘substratum-laden deviant variety’ (Singh, 2007), which is generally considered a second language variety yet many users currently view it as their first language (Sailaja, 2012). The following lines by Patra (2016, p. 237) reflect the nature of the quest for Indian English:

> “Don’t write in English, they said,
> English is not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
> Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
> Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
> Any language I like? The language I speak
> Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness’s,
> All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
> Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest
> It is as human as I am human, don’t
> You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my
> Hopes and it is useful to me . . .”

The nature of the language portrayed by the writer suggests an adequate solution to the previously mentioned issues inherent in self-expression, which British English was accused of lacking. This echoes the claim made by Rao (1963), according to which Indians can neither write exclusively as Indians nor as Brits, and would thus welcome the idea of being associated with a means of expression that would be as colourful and distinctive as American or Irish as it would embody the local pace and lifestyle. One of the respondents in the previously mentioned survey adamantly asserts, in fact, that non-native varieties such as Indian English are not deviant, owing to the fact that they add richness to the language and are thus very natural, with another respondent highlighting the dynamic nature of the evolution of languages (Hohenthal, 1998).

In 2005, a change in policy by the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT) involving revisions of the curriculum framework appeared to embrace users’ fondness for Indian English, as it was defined as a distinct variety with its own status and identity, able to serve as an educational model (NCF, 2005). Sailaja (2012) calls for the implementation of a prescriptive standard of the variety which, he feels, the education system still lacks. Indian citizens’ identification with the variety was confirmed by Saghal (1991), who claim that it has become increasingly respectable, and by Trudgill (1995), who contended that “speakers of the model variety are close at hand”

(p. 316). According to Balasubramanian (Sailaja, 2011), Indian English is currently at Schneider's phases 4 (endonormative stabilization) and 5 (differentiation) in its developmental process.

Kachru (1986, p. 31) contended that "educated Indian English provides a regulative norm", at that time already substantiated by the presence of this language variety on the radio – namely on Akashwani – and on the TV channel Doordarshan – as well as printed press, such as *The Hindu, The Times of India* and *Indian Express.* Authors have also made use of the variety, as exemplified by Rao's *Kanthapura* and *The Serpent and the Rope* or by Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* and *Untouchable,* whose display of Indian English features have, however, led some to question the "linguistic exhibitionism" that pervades these literary works (Kachru, 1986).

Kachru (1986) asserted that the "indianization" of English was likely to raise questions of intelligibility, later echoed by Crystal (1988), who believed that the "cultural inappropriacy" inherent in a nativized model may lead its speakers to struggle when communicating with other users of the language, particularly in the context of English as a Lingua Franca (i.e. communication in English between users with different first languages; Crystal, 2003). Moreover, when pondering on the plurality inherent in his country's linguistic landscape, Kachru (1986) metaphorically used the term "elephantness", and thus went as far as contending that, in reality, there are several Indian Englishes, echoed by Dasgupta (1993). This appears to further support the claim for a national variety of Indian English, able to act as an internal Lingua Franca, whose main features shall now be explored.

Lexical Features

Jenkins (2009) argues that there are three types of lexical variation in Outer and Expanding Circle countries, India being a case in point of the former:

1) locally coined words and expressions
2) borrowings from indigenous languages
3) idioms

King (2010) claims that more has been written about Indian English than other varieties, suggesting "it is Exhibit A in the Outer Circle of world Englishes" (p. 319), yet a number of its features remain unknown to speakers of other varieties. A survey was conducted by Mehrotra (2003) in order to answer the underlying question "Is Indian English usage significantly opaque to outsiders?" (p. 19). As such, British respondents were asked to share their views with regard to 20 words and phrases by stating whether they understood them and what the inferred meanings were. These words were chosen based on their frequency of occurrence, pan-India intelligibility and suitability to the given socio-cultural context. In line with Jenkins' contribution, some of these were locally coined, such as "weightage", "votebank", "eve teasing", "tiffin", "topper", "prepone", "airdash", "timepass", "convent-educated", "face-cut", or "foreign-returned", some of which exemplify the pervasion of hybrid constructions in Indian English. Others, however, have undergone changes in meaning, as exemplified by "keep", meaning "put", and "stay", meaning "live" (Balasubramanian, 2009), or "pass out", meaning "graduate". Similarly, the word "too" is often used as a synonym of "very", as occurs in the utterance "he is too good" (Nidhi & Chawla, 2018)

Code-switching plays a significant role and occurs via the borrowings from local languages, such as *bandh* for "strike", *lathi* for "baton" and *thali* for "plate", which come from Hindi (Sailaja, 2012), or *yaar* for "buddy", *tamasha* for "scene", *panga* for "mess" and *pucca* for "complete". These terms are used as in the following examples:

He is creating a *tamasha*
Let's do it, *yaar*
You have taken a major *panga*!
He is a *pucca* idiot

(Nidhi & Chawla, 2018)

Certain phrases are made popular via their inclusion in Bollywood songs, such as "*Golmaal*, *Golmaal*, everything's gonna be *Golmaal*", where the repeated word means "chaos", as well as in advertising slogans, such as:

- Taste *bhi* health *bhi* (taste also, health also), used by Maggie
- No *chinta* only money (no tension, only money), used by ICICI banks
- Think *hatke* (think different), used by Virgin mobiles

(Nidhi & Chawla, 2018)

Borrowings in compound nouns, which Kachru (1965) once referred to as "hybrid Indianisms", exemplified by *congress-pandal* and *police-jamadar*, are also significant, bearing in mind that compound formation is reportedly a unique feature of Indian English (Trudgill & Hannah, 2002). The extent to which code-switching occurs depends largely on context, as suggested by Balasubramaniam (2016) who shows that most borrowings occur in religion, such as *ahimsa* ("non-violence"), and in art, exemplified by *shehnai*, an instrument, and *gharana*, meaning "house of music". Titles such as *shri* and *saheb* are also worth of mention (Balasubramaniam, 2016), as well as the coinages based on the terminology of indigenous languages, such as "cousin brother" and "cousin sister" as well as the direct translation of certain expressions, which have given rise to "what is your good name?", "today morning" or "yesterday night" (Singh & Kumar, 2014).

The strength of Indian English as a model cannot solely be supported by the incorporation of linguistic features that pervade local languages. The "transfer of context" implies the inclusion of significant aspects of Indian culture such as "the caste system, social attitudes, social and religious taboos, superstitions, notions of superiority and inferiority" (Kachru, 1965, p. 399), exemplified by the use of "see" (Mehrotra, 2013), or idioms such as "to eat someone's head" (Kachru, 1986), or "to eat money" which may be unintelligible to foreigners but play an important role in interaction amongst locals. Such lexical deviations from native varieties appear to respond to Rao's (1963) earlier contention that one's own spirit has to be conveyed in a language that is not one's own, thereby further questioning the role that Standard British English would continue to play as a model for the Indian nation.

Grammatical and Discourse Features

It has been claimed that Indian English is "syntactically close to the native varieties" (Salles Bernal, 2015, p. 93), while displaying greater formality and features that have endowed it with a distinctive character that reflects the impact of Indian languages, especially Hindi, supporting the call for a model that embodies users' background. As occurs with the previously explored lexical features, grammatical features undeniably reflect the impact of the linguistic setting in which the new variety emerges, a process referred to as "substrate influence" (Sharma, 2009), although these are less likely to trigger unintelligibility.

When pondering on the oft-claimed frequent use of the progressive aspect with stative verbs (Kachru, 1986; Trudgill & Hannah, 2002), exemplified by "I am having three books with me" (Sailaja, 2009, p. 49), or "I'm believing you" (Nidhi & Chawla, 2018). Balasubramanian (2011) shows that in reality this occurs on certain occasions and with few stative verbs. He also provides the following example to illustrate how usage may differ:

- Indian: I am weighing 90 lbs.
- Non-Indian: The butcher is weighing the meat.

Similarly, the arbitrary use of articles, namely "a" and "the", mirror the lack thereof in Hindi (Kachru, 1986), whereas the frequent use of "also" at the end of sentences, as well as "only" and "itself" to underline place and time signals the interference of the local word "hi" (Singh & Kumar, 2014). Superfluity by means of additional prepositions is a common feature, exemplified by "discuss about", "order for" and "reply back" (Nidhi & Chawla, 2018).

Negation is another feature which shows how the variety exudes a distinctive character without preventing its users from being intelligible when interacting abroad, supporting the claim to its acceptance as a national model. It has been argued that Indian English users display a preference for explicit negation, as opposed to the implicit negation favoured by British speakers, purportedly for cultural and linguistic reasons inherent in the Hindi setting (Aitchison & Agnihotri, 1994). This is exemplified below:

British speaker:
I don’t think I’m capable of working all night.
Indian speaker:
I think I’m not capable of working all night.
(Aitchison & Agnihotri, 1994)

The impact of Hindi is also noticeable in the change in word order (Singh & Kumar, 2014), exemplified by “when you will begin?” (Sailaja, 2009), which displays the absence of the typical subject-verb inversion that characterises English interrogative forms. Nonetheless, the irregularity inherent in the use of such particles in the syntactical context has led Sailaja (2009) to call for more research and documentation as regards the definition of Indian English, particularly as they represent a challenge when assessing its role as a national model.

To add to its distinctiveness, the use of additional prepositions has also been noted by Trudgill and Hannah (2002), who mention “to accompany with” and “to combat against” as examples. Singh and Kumar (2014) note that Sailaja (2012) goes further by distinguishing between standard and non-standard Indian English, the latter making extensive use of “isn’t it?” and “no?” as question tags regardless of the preceding phrase, as opposed to the former, which mirrors the conventions inherent in Standard British English. Such a distinction may be pivotal as one would have to opt for one variety to fulfil its role as a national model.

Furthermore, Jenkins (2009) points out that the influence of indigenous cultures has prompted the introduction of new discourse styles that are absent from English as a Native Language (ENL) use. In India, this consists of expressions of thanks and deferential vocabulary, as well as the use of blessings. Phrases such as “respected sir” and “yours most obediently” are reportedly common amongst Indian users, in spite of their absence amongst British or American speakers (Sailaja, 2009). This appears to be counteracted by an array of discourse features which bear resemblance to native varieties, such as *I think, the thing is, I mean*, and the abundance of *and* as a discourse linker (Sailaja, 2012), which are likely to account for increased intelligibility.

Phonological Features

It has been claimed that Indian English “is best identified through its phonological features” (Patra, 2016, p. 248), which include a reduced vowel inventory, the absence of certain fricative sounds and the substitution of retroflex stops for alveolar stops (Bansal, 1976; Wells, 1982). According to Jenkins (2009), /θ/ and /δ/ sounds in “thin” and “this” would be pronounced like /t/ and /d/, respectively. Indian English is a syllable-timed variety, in contrast with Standard British English, which is stress-timed (Gargesh, 2004). Kachru (1986) claimed that Indian identity is expressed not only “in the pronunciation of some vowels or consonants, or in the stressing of words, but is deeper than that: it is in the rhythm and the pauses" (p. 32).

While such features undeniably reflect the impact of local languages, the adoption of one variety as a national model may be challenged by findings which substantiate the phonological diversity that pervades the country. A recent study conducted by Sirsa and Redford (2013) to assess whether such features account for an L1-influenced variety of English or a pan-Indic variety, this instability stems from the fact that "speakers are nearly always exposed to the language after they have acquired one or more indigenous Indian languages" (p. 14), in contrast with what occurs with other varieties of English.

Conclusion

English has increasingly played a major role in the social lives of Indians (Hohenthal, 1998) and still provides a linguistic tool in terms of administrative cohesiveness (Patra, 2016, p. 241) in a country marked by linguistic and ethnic diversity. In this context, Crystal (1988) pointed out that English-speaking communities have expressed their fondness for a language variety that is capable of reflecting their experiences and emotions while at the same time embracing the universality and intelligibility that is needed in the dialogue with other countries. Such a consideration appears to play an essential role in educational contexts, where learners should be exposed to such a variety from a young age, preparing them for the future while respecting their past.

While some of the features that pervade Indian English may cause unintelligibility overseas, it can be concluded that they act as important identity markers which reflect the impact of local languages, particularly of Hindi (Mehrorta, 2003). These appear to strengthen the distinctiveness of this language variety and coexist with features inherent in the standard native variety. It can therefore be concluded that Indian English can provide the conditions and resources to act as a national model for the Indian nation, although further standardization and codification are likely to be needed (Ahulu, 1997), especially as far as the educational context is concerned (Sailaja, 2012).

Further research is needed in order to understand the nature of the different elements inherent in Indian English, as well as the role it plays in the social and educational contexts that pervade the nation, and the manner in which this is affected by varying degrees of access to education. It shall also provide insight into the input from the different languages within India and the extent to which Indian English can differ with relation to its region of use, while maintaining a national identity. Ultimately, the role that the language plays in the country's linguistic landscape is therefore one that embodies what has been referred to as the uncanny adaptability of English (Narayan, 1989), which has made Indian English "culture-bound in the socio-cultural setting of India" (Kachru, 1965, p. 410).

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