

A Case for the Standardization of Indian English

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Ankur Betageri

Why Standardization?

A language evolves organically over centuries to name and describe the material and non-material reality of a language-speaking community, and it evolves by interacting with other linguistic and non-linguistic cultures. I argue for the institution of an Indian Standard for Indian English as it is important to give institutional legitimacy to an indigenously evolved regime of rules, principles and words to guide the sea of linguistic variation that is Indian English.



We need a Standard Indian English: (i) To acknowledge the Indianness of Indian English which means to acknowledge it as an acculturated Indian language and to end its problematic status as a second or foreign language which derives its authenticity from foreign sources, that is, standard varieties of British English and American English. (ii) To acknowledge that nationalistically defined Standard British English and Standard American English as *global* standards — by privileging the general over the particular, the same and similar over the different, and the clichéd over the singular — hamper and stultify the creative evolution of Indian English. (iii) To nurture the creative potential of Indian English which would humanize and democratize the language which is being primarily used by the institutions of state and corporations as a language of power to ensure the subordination and obedience of people.

Deleuze and Guattari¹ define language as “a set of all order-words, implicit presuppositions, or speech acts current in a language at a given

moment,” order-words for them being “not a particular category of explicit statements (for example, in the imperative), but the relation of every word or every statement to implicit presuppositions, in other words, to speech acts that are, and can only be, accomplished in the statement.” If language is thus characterized by a relation of “implicit presuppositions” between words and statement the humanization and democratization of a language involves legitimizing the speech-patterns of a significant population of speakers by instituting an accommodative standard which the speakers can emulate without uprooting the speech-forms from the social, historical and geographical conditions which had given birth to them.

Is Indian English a Minor Language?

Minor languages do not exist in themselves: they exist only in relation to a major language and are also investments of that language for the purposes of making it minor.²

Though English, according to an estimate based on 2001 Census of India, is spoken by nearly 125 million people in India³ — the linguist David Crystal puts the figure at 200 million⁴ — many Indian speakers of the language experience, what can be called, a sense of cultural dislocation in using the language. It is as if the English that we speak with our family members, neighbours, colleagues and friends is not our own but owned by some foreign power. This recognition of foreign “ownership” of the language creates bad faith leaving in us a lingering feeling of speaking in a borrowed language. It is as if the English that is daily moulded by our mouths while describing the material reality of our world and by jostling with the sound and syntactic patterns of other languages on our tongue are not the real moulds; as if the real moulds are somewhere else, in Britain and America, and that we are just miming the speech of the real masters and standard-bearers of speech.

Why do we Indians feel like this when we speak in English? Is this feeling of cultural dislocation common to speakers whose English is defined as a second or foreign language like the speakers of *new Englishes* like West African English, Filipino English, Indian English and Singapore English? Or do speech communities which are said to use English as a first and primary language like the speakers of Australian English, Canadian English, South African English, New Zealand English, Scottish English and Ulster English (Northern Irish English) also experience this sense of cultural dislocation given the global prevalence of Standard British and Standard American Englishes? Answering this question without

empirical data would be difficult but one important reason for the sense of cultural dislocation of the speakers of English in India is the undifferentiated nature of English spoken here and the complete absence of an institutional identity for Indian English. Because of this lack of institutional identity though over 125 million of us speak a variety of English — or some varieties of English — we are not sure what our English is exactly like. We know Indian English is not British English, though our English, at least the written English, is largely modelled on British English. Indian English is also not American English, though it has a considerable influence on our English due its pervasiveness in global mass-media and multinational institutions. Indian English is also not International English, (or EIIP, English for International and Intra-national Purposes,) a kind of limited-register English used by second-language speakers of English in different countries as Indian English is deeply and organically — though still not *authentically* — connected with our way of life in urban India. Indian English, categorized as a second or additional language of a large part of its speakers in India, is as distinctive a variety of English as native-speaker varieties like Australian and South African Englishes and cannot be seen as a minority language of a foreign standard variety. Deleuze and Guattari define a minor language as one defined by its *power of variation* while a major language is one which is defined by its *power of constants*. There is no doubt that Indian English is an extremely significant language in India, but in spite of its significance, it is still a *minor-language-without-a-major-language*: a spectrum of variations without a single indigenous variation which has been granted the status of major language. This absence of a major language takes away the possibility of any Indian English variation functioning as a minor language.

Conceptualization of Indian English

Existing studies of Indian English characterize it as one of a group of varieties known as South Asian English (SAsE) with a large number of *non-native* speakers using it as a second language.⁵ This distinction of native and non-native speakers is problematic as it does not help us in understanding the bilingual linguistic practices of urban Indian population which uses Indian English *and* a Bhasha (a “regional” language) with equal frequency though the degree of competence in both the languages varies. Also the tendency to characterize Indian English and other South Asian Englishes (SAsEs) as spoken only by non-native speakers in opposition

to American English or Australian English which is spoken by native speakers is misleading and inaccurate as native speakers of SAsEs do exist.⁶ Nevertheless even if SAsE is taken as a group of varieties which has both native and non-native speakers it does not really take into account the uniqueness in which Indian English is spoken in urban India which is as a default language of communication with anyone who does not speak the regional Indian language or the Bhasha. But in spite of its Indian acculturation and pan-Indian presence Indian English positions itself as a minority language of one of the foreign standard Englishes and by positioning itself thus it renders its acculturation illegitimate, and by not being a minor language of a foreign standard English in any authentic sense it fails to harness the power of variation to be a creative minor language.

Speaking in English as a Mode of Subordinating Speech to Imperial Standards: the Case of Likelihood Constraints Become Obligatory Constraints

Language is made not to be believed but to be obeyed, and to compel obedience.⁷

The limited-register English that we hear spoken on Indian television and radio, and on public platforms, has a formal structure that is extremely rigid and rehearsed. This inflexibility and clichéd quality of English can be understood by looking at the formal theory of language structure proposed by Zellig Harris in which he sees language as characterized by a set of constraints which produces a set of possible sentences.⁸ According to Harris, words, in addition to semantic information (or meaning), carry with them non-linguistic information about their *frequency of co-occurrence with other words*. This non-linguistic information refers to physical patterns, and, as such, is a measure of order, or “of the degree to which a pattern departs from randomness.”⁹ Some words tend to occur next to another more frequently as a matter of usage, as, for example, the word “the” which is usually followed by a noun or a nominalized phrase. (Nominalized phrase is the use of a word which is not a noun as a noun by turning it into a phrase. Eg: ‘the strong’ and ‘the weak’ where the adjectives ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ have been turned into nouns). This only means it is *more likely* for the definite article “the” to be followed by a noun or a nominalized phrase; Harris called such relations “likelihood constraints.” While likelihood constraints only reflect word combinations that a community happens to use, and is thus optional, these customary patterns can become conventionalized and turn into what Harris called “obligatory constraints.” When this happens, a user beginning a sentence with “the” *must* use a noun or a nominalized phrase as the next word.

In varieties like Indian English which define themselves in relation to a foreign standard variety it is not uncommon to find ossified enunciatory structures constraining the speakers to stick to clichéd formal patterns, hampering the natural creativity and expressivity of speech. These are clear cases of likelihood constraints having turned into obligatory constraints, and obligatory constraints turn the speech patterns of a speech community without an indigenous standard into mimicry. This is because a variety with a foreign standard follows the customary speech patterns of the major (or Master) language *as a rule*, the speakers of the variety being always aware of the derivative status of their variety which is supposed to follow a correct and proper foreign standard. And when likelihood constraints become obligatory constraints, a language loses its power of variation and its speech possibilities are severely diminished.

The Role of Standardization in the Evolution of Romance Languages

Institutional intervention and standardization played a very important role in the transformation of variants of Vulgar Latin into Proto-Romance languages which further evolved into the distinct Romance Languages of Italian, Spanish, Catalan, Portuguese, French and Romanian.

Before the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 C.E. the regions conquered by the Romans were linguistically rather homogenous and the Romans imposed Latin, the official language of the Roman Empire, on all of them. The language of governance being Latin the, it kept the development of local variations in check though the colloquial or Vulgar Latin that the masses spoke was considerably different from the written Latin of the Roman Empire. But once the Western Roman Empire collapsed in fifth century C.E., Vulgar Latin whose development was kept in check began to change rapidly and gave birth to a large variety of Proto-Romance languages. Though the divergence in languages went unnoticed by the administration for a few centuries, awareness of new forms of Vulgar Latin forced Charlemagne in the early ninth century C.E. to hire a grammarian named Alcuin to prepare a detailed report on the state of language in the Roman kingdom. Alcuin studied the language in the kingdom and reported that a new language called “*Rustica Romana*” existed outside the walls of Charlemagne’s castle.¹⁰

Rustica Romana in the Middle Ages, much like the Indian language Prakrit which is a collection of dialects or variations of Ardhamagadhi, did not refer to the existence of a single language of that name; rather

it referred to the coexistence of many Romance dialects in what is called as a “dialect continuum.” In a dialect continuum the distinct dialect of one region is connected to the distinct dialect of another region by a continuum of many common dialects. And in Europe, “the dialect of medieval Paris... was connected to the dialect of Florence by a continuum of French, Franco-Provencal, and Gallo-Italian dialects. Although sharp transitions (isoglosses) did exist in this continuum, compared to the form of Latin spoken in governmental and ecclesiastical organizations, the divergent set of Franco-Romance, Hispano-Romance and Italo-Romance dialects was a highly deterritorialized entity.”¹¹

These “highly deterritorialized” Romance dialects, though minor “languages” in relation to Latin, became major “languages” relative to other dialects. According to DeLanda,¹² “the commercial revolution that took place in Europe from the eleventh to fourteenth centuries, and the diversification of governmental functions in the proliferating city states, multiplied the uses of writing: licenses, certificates, petitions and denunciations, will and post-mortem inventories, commercial and financial contracts began to be written with increased frequency.” As the increased demand to write was not met by classical Latin scribes, governments of many regional capitals commissioned the creation of writing systems for their own dialects. And while the appearance of written forms reduced the intensity of variation and decelerated the evolution of dialects, they also had territorializing effects, making some members of the dialect continuum more discrete and constant, and increasing their level of prestige in relation to the main standard language, Latin. And over the course of years these written dialects achieved a level of constancy and attained a unique identity transforming them into major languages in relation to other dialects of the continuum which remained minor.

The case of Indian English is a little different; it is the case of a variety whose variation and growth due to its contact with various cultures and languages in the Indian subcontinent has been arrested by the imposition of foreign standards, which, rather than legitimizing variation, treat it as an aberration and bring about a kind of deathly globalized uniformity. It is as if the speakers of Italo-Romance (or Hispano-Romance or Franco-Romance) were forced to consider written Latin as their Standard language and mimic the formal speech structures and foreign accents of Latin as the proper way to speak Italo-Romance! By not acknowledging the need for an indigenous standard for Indian English we are not only invalidating and undermining an entire universe of linguistic variation we are also recreating Indian English as a colonized language, as a second-rate subsidiary language, incapable to ever being

correct, independent or authentic as it is always — already *a corruption* of the authentic Standard British English or Standard American English.

English in India

Kachru¹³ identifies three early phases of the spread of English in India contributed to by three distinct groups of people: Christian missionaries, native enthusiasts of English education in the nineteenth century and nineteenth century British administrators. British missionaries who had come to India for the purpose of proselytizing were responsible, especially through their educational activities, for the first phase of spread of English. Though the missionary educational and proselytizing efforts started in a small way in 1614, it became more effective in 1659 when missionaries were allowed the use of the ships belonging to East India Company. In 1765 when encouragement to missionaries was completely stopped, the missionaries in England agitated under the leadership of the British MP and Christian evangelist Charles Grant leading to the passing of the 13th Resolution by the House of Commons in 1813. The 13th Resolution which sought “to promote the interests and happiness of the native inhabitants of British dominions of India” by introducing “among them... useful knowledge... of religious and moral improvement” revitalized missionary educational activities in India.

The second phase of the spread of English was due to the efforts of a small group of Indians especially in Bengal who wanted to study English along with Persian and Bengali. This group existed before Raja Rammohun Roy but under his leadership became especially influential in shaping British educational policy.

The third phase of the spread of English is the political phase when English became the medium of public education in India following the English Education Act of 1835. T.B. Macaulay’s Minute on Education (1835) –in which he, in a sense, reiterated many of the arguments for English education put forth by Raja Rammohun Roy in his famous letter of 1823 to Lord Amherst — established the importance of English as a medium of education by noting the European superiority in producing “works in which facts are recorded and general principles investigated” as opposed to “works of imagination” like Sanskrit and Arabic poetry.¹⁴

So, though the British East India Company brought English with it when it arrived in India four hundred years ago in 1601, it is 1835, the year when English became the medium of public education, that is seen as the turning point in the history of English language in India.

This means English has existed as the spoken language of a considerable portion of the Indian population for a little under 200 years, though according to Kachru's¹⁵ assessment it is a little over 200 years old. Even if Indian English is only over 179 years old, it has developed in diverse ways and we have many varieties of English spoken in the country with their own distinct phonetic and semantic structures. It is interesting to consider the age of Hindi, often claimed to be the most widely spoken language in India by clubbing together a set of related languages and calling them 'dialects', to get a perspective on the duration of English as a spoken language in India. If we trace the beginning of modern Hindi to 1881, the year when Bihar adopted the newly standardized Hindi as its official language, Hindi is only 135 years old — that is, 44 years younger than English! — though Hindustani or Hindavi, the language out of which modern languages like Hindi and Urdu have evolved, existed in some form at least since the thirteenth century. Kachru¹⁶ identifies *educated South Asian English* as the variety which has pan-regional intelligibility. This educated South Asian English which is not a monolithic entity but whose phonology, grammar and lexical intrusion have been extensively studied seems to be the most eligible variety to be made into Standard Indian English.

An indigenously evolved variety, such as educated South Asian English, as a standard would be capable of being more inclusive and accepting of other varieties of Indian English lower on the continuum of intelligibility than a culturally alien standard variety like Standard British English. If "the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" as Wittgenstein¹⁷ famously put it, then the enforcing of alien syntactical, phonological and cultural structures of British or American English on Indian varieties of English is to make indigenous life-forms captive of alien life-forms. To speak a Standard English, that is British English or American English, is to uproot oneself from one's Indianness to become British or American: this loss of ground and roots causes a chain-reaction of uprooting because as Simone Weil¹⁸, the French philosopher, said, "whoever is uprooted himself uproots others. Whoever is rooted himself doesn't uproot others." The imposition of a rigid and formal mass media English, rigid and formal as explained earlier because of its status as a minor language, on the indigenous speakers, has a similar effect: it uproots people from an accultured variety of English — that is, an Indianized English — and enforces on them an alien English which is destructive to, and delegitimizing of, indigenous life-forms.

The Indian English which defines itself in relation to an alien standard, uproots the organically evolved Indian English varieties. Every

form of Indian English which has developed indigenously is illegitimate and inauthentic, because authentic English is defined as the English of “native speakers” and therefore as a language which is not spoken in India. We must learn to speak English, good English, from “them”—the “native speakers,” those who use English as a first and primary language—because only “they” speak authentic English and our English *is like that only*.

When we use English the way we do as Indians, that is creatively and uniquely, the alien global standard varieties force us to characterize our enunciations as “Indianisms” rendering our English inferior in all respects to standard enunciations in British and American English. The Standard English that we subscribe to constantly forces us to “correct” our English, calling ghee “clarified butter”, dal “lentil porridge”, kumkum “vermillion powder” and chapatti “flatbread” making our entire way of life, and our lived universe, derivative and second rate. Those who speak for the cause of the Bhashas, and worry about their diminishing importance and the resulting neglect of extremely large sections of Indian population, ask for the abolition of English language as a medium of study in schools, and the promotion of the Bhashas and its use and endorsement by the governmental institutions. But this absolutist demand can never be satisfied as the linguistic diversity and federal structure of India necessitates the use of English—English being still the most widely accepted, and most widely understood, language in the country. This is why despite repeated demands for the abolition of English, the language has only grown in India, and is spoken by such a large number of speakers that India has the distinction of being the second largest English-speaking nation in the world after the United States of America. This being the situation, it is important to acknowledge Indian English as a transplanted language which, coming into contact with a new land and its people, has become Indianized and has therefore become as capable a carrier of our culture as is a Bhasha language. Therefore, the continued institutional neglect of Indian English and its subordination to — or substitution with — a foreign Standard English will only aggravate the spiritual displacement and uprooting of people from their milieu, culture and traditions.

Indian English can play a very important role in connecting different linguistic communities and cultures but its characterization as a minor language of British and American Englishes has made it the killer language of globalization which can only be local and particular by mocking and caricaturing itself. This hollowing out of the language through commercialization and its use as a capitalistic vehicle for the imposition of forms of life which are alienating and uprooting can only be resisted

by helping it develop into a language of creativity and daily speech. And a language can develop creatively when — once it has developed into a variation which is significant and singular — it is freed from a system of homogenization which is distant and alien, and in this case when Indian English is freed from undergoing a homogenization with either British English or American English.

The acceptance and consolidation of Indian English as an Indian language catering to the descriptive and expressive needs of the Indian populace requires it to be turned into a Standard Language. This process of standardization can be begun by setting up a Committee for the Standardization of Indian English. The Committee can undertake research into the varieties of Indian English and evolve a method to come up with a Standard Indian English (which may be a variety very different from 'educated South Asian English' that many linguists have proposed for standardization). This Standard Indian English while being accommodative of all the varieties of English spoken in the country will provide the power of constancy to Indian English, transforming it into a democratic and vibrant major language in touch with, and responsive to, the life-world of the people of India.

Endnotes:

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