

Looking for Indian Variety of English in Indian Writing in English

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Abstract:

The present paper explores how the Indian writing in English has gone through various phases to be what it is today. It was difficult for the non-native writers to present the Indian culture and context into a language which was not their own. In this process, there emerged various expressions which were linguistically awkward from the point of the native users Standard English. Nevertheless, the Indian writers over the years achieved a level where their language began to be not only accepted but also admired even by the native users of English. One can feel the Indian Variety of English in these texts, yet in the absence of any norms or a regulatory body, it cannot be officially declared the Standard Indian Variety of English.

Indian writing in English has gone through many phases in becoming what it is today. A holistic view reveals that there are both similarities and differences in what it used be in the early years and what it is today.

Basically, it was a presentation of Indian culture in English, and it is the same even today. The difference is in the way the English language was put to use earlier and how it is used now. The common target was acceptability, both national and international, and it is the same for the writers of the present. The problem of acceptability is not faced by native writers because they present their own culture in their own language, which is easier than presenting a culture in a foreign language. It was the writing of non-native creative writers that occasionally gave rise to linguistic unintelligibility. Due to cultural differences there used to emerge expressions that were both culturally and linguistically awkward to the native users of English.

But judging Indian writers only on the basis of pro-east/west factor would mean ignoring the language s\he has made use of. And it is this linguistic creativity that is bringing them millions. As Salman Rushdie remarks about the English language:

[It] ...now grows from many roots, and those whom it once colonized are carving out large territories within the language for themselves. (Bhongle ed. 39)

And anyway, whether this fact is acknowledged or not, “the English language is a tool of power, domination and elitist identity, and of communication across continents.” (Kachru, *Alchemy* 4) There is a sort of complacency about the Indian Variety of English. It may be considered by some like the American, the Canadian, the Irish, the Australian or the New Zealand variety. But the western view about this cannot be ignored. When Quirk et al. list varieties of English in *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* starting with the British and American as standard varieties, they place Scotland, Ireland and

Canada in one category. They place South Africa, Australia and New Zealand in the next category. Then they mention the Caribbean English as “there is the increasing recognition that the language of government and other agencies observes an indigenous standard...” (22) It is after all these that they group “varieties according to interference” (27), in which are included the South Asian (Indian) English, the East/West African English, though they add for India and Pakistan “where efficient and fairly stable varieties of English are prominent in educated use at the highest political and professional level and may possibly acquire the status of national standards.” The use of the term “may” possibly show that there is only a fifty-fifty chance of this happening due to lack of any regulatory norm.

About Indian English users Braj B Kachru says, “A standard (or educated) IE bilingual may be defined as one who is intelligible not only to other Indians in different parts of the subcontinent, but ideally speaking, to the native speakers of English.” (Kachru, *Indianization* 129).

The main reason behind this is that certain cultural items which do not exist in western culture are to be presented in the English language, which is difficult, and the creativity lay in doing so efficiently. The current situation is different, as there has been a modification of this efficiency to even include the native readers. Earlier the deviations were there as there were no other options; today they are there in spite of the options. Earlier the aim was perhaps to express anything Indian in English; today it is to express it in the best possible English, even if that means going beyond the rules of grammar. It will not be an exaggeration to say that today linguistic deviations and innovations are part and parcel of almost all Indian writers. Readers can see things on the page. Although regarding the earlier writers, it was said that “Sentence structure remains nondeviant in both narration and dialog ...”, says Kachru in *The Other Tongue*. (288)

However, writers like Arundhati Roy deviate\innovate at all the linguistic levels. So, there is not only Indianness but also Englishness about their English, which is perhaps the major difference between the earlier writers and the later other writers. The latter not only talk about India, but they also tell you about the English language, which even a native writer might want to emulate. In fact, writers like Arundhati Roy have Englishized Indian English. Indian writers have made use of loan Indian words, hybridizations and lexical adjustments, but these are not the only features that mark Indian English as distinct from Standard English. If the Indian writers had not Indianized their English, it would have been a colossal task to present the Indian context in Standard Variety of English.

However, doing so has also been a cause of disapproval because this type of variety would never be used by English speaking community in India. As Tabish Khair says, “...Rao’s Sanskritised English does not mark the inscription of a spoken language - an Indian dialect of English - but a creation of a doubly textualized language” (107) But he does differentiate between Rushdie and Rao: “...Rushdie is mostly trying to appropriate a kind of Indian English that his characters are supposed to speak while Rao is mostly translating the vernaculars spoken by his characters” (110).

Yet it could be argued that if using Indian terms, hybridizing and translating are considered Indianization, then the use of American or British terms must be Americanization or Anglicization. So, if Bharti Mukherjee uses the American words – *okra* for Kiran Desai’s *ladyfinger* and *eggplant* for R. K Narayan’s

brinjal - she is Americanizing. She also uses *airplanes* and *traveling*. Not only this, she also goes against the anti-colonial post-colonial principle of non-glossing Indian terms; she italicizes the *durwans* and *Rosogollas*. And Mukul Keswan uses Latin terms *Ad Dei gloriam* and *Quod erat demonstrandum* in his work.

Shashi Tharoor in his book *Bookless in Baghdad* says that there are no trappings of Englishness in his idyllic world. (50) He goes on to say that no English writer can have a mass following in India because only two per cent population read English and only a microscopic minority of it understand and use correct English. (48)

So Indian writers would not like to be judged by only two per cent Indian users of English. The effort is not worth it. To stand tall as a genuine English writer one has to take into consideration the native users of English language too. If the Indians like Wodehouse for his non-colonialism and neutrality the natives would like a non-native writer on reciprocal terms.

With their language Indian writers have shown, as Shashi Tharoor says, "...we can share the world with the English on equal terms..." (*Bookless* 52) This is what the Indians want - equality with the natives. A few writers have achieved this by presenting Indian culture in a kind of innovative English that even the native users feel like emulating. Non-native writers can handle the language, especially the written variety, with the same deftness as any reputed native writer would do. Many non-native users are more competent than many natives in the three areas of reading, listening and writing.

To quote from *The politics of Indians' English*:

... even in monolingual communities all native speakers of a given language are not native writers; speech is caught and picked up as part of one's growth in a linguistic environment but writing must be learned and cultivated. It is assumed that the entire language, including reading, writing and stylistic competence comes naturally to a native speaker, and there is nothing to be learned. This is not so: some areas of any language are **foreign** even to its native speakers. (75)

In fact, a writer like Arundhati Roy just loves English and is quite vocal about this:... The fact is that I love English. I adore it. It is the skin on my thought. (Bhongle ed. 105)

This is supported by Anita Desai, who, quite frankly, adds: When we wrote, we tended to write based on the literature we read, not on the way people spoke. I congratulate Arundhati Roy (Bhongle ed.126) She also candidly admits another fact that few writers/scholars would do: There's suddenly been a whole new crop of Indian writers, far more confident – confident about handling English, far more sure of themselves as writers, actually being able to earn a living, as writers, which was all unheard of when I was starting off. (Kachru, *Asian Englishes* 160)

There are academicians and critics who still have inhibitions about this: The Indian narrative begins with Raja Rao whose nativization of English is, by far, the best strategy to avoid containment by Standard English structures and usage. (Narasimhaiah ed.71)

However, such champions themselves prefer to use the standard variety, according to Krishnaswamy (*The Politics of Indians' English*). Perhaps they are not comfortable with and confident about the Indian Variety

of English. Criticism in print about a person or country that has harmed in the past is considered as a good uniting factor. But it can be seen that the whole thing is purely linguistic and not negative. What the Indian writers today really reject is bookish, formal, low frequency and outdated English which most of the earlier Indian writers have used. And as Salman Rushdie says, “It is interesting that so few of these criticisms are literary in the pure sense of the word. For the most part they do not deal with language, voice, psychological or social insights, imagination or talent. Rather they are about class, power and belief.” (Rushdie and West eds. 13) Moreover, he says, “...in England at least, the British writers are often chastised by reviewers for their lack of Indian-style ambition and verve. It feels the East is imposing itself on the West, rather than the other way round.” (Rushdie and West eds. 14)

It could be said that in the Indian case, the language is almost the destination not just a vehicle. The stuff that makes India can be found in all the Indian texts: the earlier as well as the present ones. The difference is in the use of English language. And today, there is appreciation for the non-native writers even among the native users of English

So, if earlier this rate was somewhere in the fifties or sixties, today it is one hundred percent, and the reason is the use of English language, which has become a child’s play for the Indian writers today. It would be relevant and helpful to explore this aspect in the early Indian writings in English. While the themes, the stuff called Indianness were and are more or less similar, it is the language which needs to be explored. Linguistic limitations in rendering the Indian terms and concepts into English were conveniently termed as Indianisms.

Of course, this Indianizing should have been the first choice not the last one, as in the case of earlier writers. And the process should have covered a wider area, not just finding equivalents for Indian lexical items. It cannot be denied that there are problems in presenting the Indian terms in the English language, but this problem is directly related to the area of focus. The earlier writers used to focus even on rendering the speech acts of those people who would never have spoken, or even thought of speaking in English, and the whole process not only appeared artificial, but also linguistically awkward.

Conrad’s characters speaking in English can be justified because his stories are always set against the background where English alone can be the possible language of communication.” (Bhongle ed. 8) But this is not the case with Indian writers. In translating everything, not only does the originality escapes, but also an unintended originality creeps in. For instance, while translating the abuses like *saala* as **brother-in-law**, the sting of the abuse is lost. And while presenting *phoolshujja*, as **flowerbed** in English, a nuptial concept changes to a gardening term. Unintended originality creeps in.

Yet Mulk Raj Anand advocates for good Indian English literature. He goes, “I believe that Indian English writing has come to stay as a literature of India because it is based on the Indian English language of the most vital character, like Irish English, American English, Welsh English, Australian English or Canadian English.” (Naik ed. 24)

So according to the above view Indian English and not Standard English should be used by the Indian English writers. It is not just only him but another famous writer who advocates the fictitious term Indian English - Mr. Raja Rao, who also fantasizes that some day the Indian English will have the same status as

the other established and accepted varieties of English. But not a single scholar has taken the troubles to actually define the term Indian English, nor they have noticed the fact that in the Indian schools, colleges and the universities it is the Standard British or American English that is being taught not the Indian variety, which is non-existent.

It would be appropriate to juxtapose another view, but different from the above:

As Tabish Khair points out, “Indian English in short is spoken by Indians but it is not a spoken language in India. Not in the sense in which it is spoken in England, Australia, USA and the Caribbean...” (122)

What exists in India is often a broad grapholect, a written, text-based language learnt to the best of one’s ability and spoken on occasions by many (but not all) literate classes. (123) And hence to make Indian English aspire to the condition of, say, Caribbean or American English would be to alienate oneself from what actually exists in India and among Indians. (125)

This was and is the major difference between the earlier Indian writers and the current ones – the attitude towards the English language. The current Indian writers do not face the earlier linguistic challenges that much, and moreover they do not consider the linguistics of the English language as taboo. Like any native writer they fearlessly and intelligently go beyond the set of rules to create something new, with the idea of enriching the English language and literature, not merely creating Indian English or Indian English literature. Any writing in English should be treated as English literature. The fact that there exists American, Australian British and Canadian literature is because English is used as the first language in these regions, but this not the case in India where English is spoken as the second language, though Indian writing in English also could be treated as Indian literature,.

Anyway the main point is that how the expression has improved over the years. The point of contention was finding a suitable way to display the Indian mind in English language. This could be done in a number of ways: the earlier writers used the dialogs and the authorial notes for this. Whereas writers like Roy have provided these insights into the Indian mind visually through linguistics. The patterns of thought can be seen on the paper. So regarding this, Roy is steps ahead; instead of providing the commentary all the time she shows the workings of the mind graphologically, lexically and syntactically. Bypassing the lower level of translating, she performs at the higher level of linguistics, like any native writer. As Mr. G.N Devy points out about most of the Indian writers and their writing:

While they had chosen to write in English their output was not comparable in stature or strength with the contemporary English, Anglo-Irish American literature. (98)

So perhaps it is not just the presentation of these things, but also the manner of presentation that is equally important. And this involves the use of language, which is the single deciding factor between a good and a not good literature. A fact also pointed out by Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things*, when the children try to show off their English by quoting from Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, which their British cousin does not even understand. With this state of things, it cannot be expected that as grownups the Indians will appreciate the so-called Indian English. For most of their learning years they have been following the Standard variety. And another interesting factor is that it is only the Indian English writers who have created Indian English, and that too because they had no other option; they were absolutely clueless about

rendering the Indian cultural items into English, besides of course translating them and taking credit for creating something new. This is not linguistic innovation. This is not the imaginative genius or any kind of creativity on the part of the writer, because anybody else could have done it, because only one option was there, translation, and everybody knows and can do the same. On the other hand, the native writers did not translate when they innovated linguistically. T.S Eliot did not translate when he created *Foresuffer*. James Joyce or E.E Cummins did not translate for the sake of innovation. All these writers had a set of choices available to them, unlike the Indian English writers, and they deliberately and consciously went beyond that set of available choices to create something new. This is linguistic innovation. This is the creative genius of a writer. In the case of Indian writing in English, everybody knew that there is only one option, and anybody would have gone for it. What these writers have done is to translate into English what was already part of the Indian literature. The structures and items they claim as innovations were already established in some Indian language, and the people might have been using them. So, what these writers did was to render those items into English, which cannot be called linguistic innovation.

If some researcher would want to study or analyze their language, all s\he will have to do is merely list the Indian English items. It would be difficult to analyze it in terms of graphology, phonology, lexis, syntax and semantics. The absence of a norm would be an obstacle, because what is Indian English among the users is due to interference with the mother tongue, and as Kachru points out “the lack of a consistent model for practice.”

(Greenbaum, ed. *English Language Today* 213)

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