

Relevance of English in the contemporary Indian situation



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Abstract

English has become a world language due of its wide diffusion outside the British island. And it has been expanded to all the continents of the world, by trade, colonization and imperialism. The worldwide expansion of English means it is now one of most widely spoken languages in the world, with over four and half hundred million speakers, and roughly, the same number who speak it as a second language. The method of its spread, however, also means that there are now many varieties of English, and it is used for many different purposes in varying social contexts. In case of India, it has a population of above 130 crores and over two hundred different languages. Alongside Hindi and some other recognized regional languages, English is one of the important official languages in India and is also widely used as a language of administration, interpersonal communication and business. This papers attempts to highlight the inroads made in, and position and prospects of English in the contemporary Indian socio-economic, political and historical context.

Keywords: English, world language, language expansion, official language, contemporary India

The reality of the twenty-first century is that life, education, and business are regulated by the superhighway culture, e-commerce, info-tech and globalization for the growing urban, metropolitan and suburban population of young aspiring, and often privileged sections of the society. This new culture of interdependence and global connectedness would demand an educational milieu, which matches this reality. Our future generation would like to have the entitlement to be equipped linguistically and technologically to meet the challenges of competition shaping the world. The role of English (and its position) is pivotal and will continue to be so. Moreover, in the new millennium, Indian linguistic diversity has become more extended in some ways. Today the range of the speech repertoire of urban and rural Indians embraces a wide variety of speech patterns: *monolingual, bi-/multilingual, bi-dialectal* and *the mixed code*. However, for a privileged minority, English is the icing on the multilingual cake. The most outstanding picture that sticks in the mind of an outsider is that

of the overwhelmingly ubiquitous use of English and of the English-dominated mixed code among the urban/semi-urban bilingual elite and the aspiring elite, especially the youth.

In general, publications in the field of ELT in India have been extensive. However, few of them address the concerns of Indian scholars regarding the impact of English on the speech of the younger generation, and even fewer take into account evidence or literature available in the Indian languages. Nor do they discuss the language-related and socio-educational issues arising out of Globalization and Information Technology. Fishman (1977) and Kachru (1982) have emphasized that the attitudes toward the rapid rise of English globally during and after the period of colonization have not been seriously researched. One wonders, however, if in the 70's and 80's they would have expected such wide-ranging technological implications as we are facing now in the new millennium in countries like India.

Discourse that identifies material progress, socio-economic power and a better quality of life with English language competence is plentiful. *South Asian Voice* (2001) commenting on the disappearing political disenchantment with *Swadeshi*, and with growing love for *globalization* said:

Another outcome of globalization has been a huge increase in salaries of senior managers, accountants, lawyers and public relations personal.... For the IT-literate, job opportunities have been plentiful, and there are also opportunities to live and earn abroad. For the English speaking upper middle-class, this has come as a boon..... Although these sections of society are in numerical terms a very small minority in the country, they are able to wield considerable authority on account of their financial clout. Their voices are far more likely to be heard in the Indian media and they are much more likely to be able to influence important political decisions in the country. Because of their familiarity with English, and privileged access to major media outlets and institutions of higher learning, they are taken to be more credible, and are thus able to exercise tremendous influence on public policy.(South Asian Voice, August 2000 edition, updated May 2001).

In the job advertisement page of a leading Indian national daily in English (*The Hindustan Times*, December 26, 2001) the following advertisement appeared from the American company, JD Edwards:

We are set to make our presence felt in India. What about you? Today, we are making our debut in India with the set-up of a new office in Mumbai in January 2002. In preparation of this exciting venture, we are seeking talented professionals in a variety of areas to join us. If you're that outstanding individual with high personal and professional ideals, send us your application today....You must be both aggressive and dynamic with strong interpersonal communication

and negotiation skills....The ability to manage, execute and communicate effectively would be an edge.... Excellent oral and written communication skills in English are essential....An attractive remuneration package will be offered to the successful candidate (emphasis added).

An analysis of the given above advertisement tells us a lot about the impact of globalization, which has spurred English and the English elite in India to greater heights, socially and economically. The title of the advertisement makes a bold claim. Here, 'we', signifying multinational company, could be interpreted to subsume the English language as well. Among the qualities the multinationals are looking for in the prospective and potential "Whiz Kids" are to be 'aggressive and dynamic with strong interpersonal, communication and negotiation skills'. However, the 'ability to manage, execute and communicate effectively' refers specifically to activities realized in English. The implication is that the ability to communicate proficiently and with self-confidence in any of the Indian languages like Assamese or Telugu or Hindi is irrelevant. The advertisement concludes decisively by disambiguating the message: 'Excellent oral and written communication skills in English are essential'. Excellent English appears to have also become synonymous with attractive remuneration.

Similarly, Daksh e-Services, a leading Indian eCRM company said in one of its advertisements:

How well equipped is a Daksh delivery team to respond to global customers in English?

Our Customer Care Specialists (CCS), typically have excellent English skills. English is the standard language of instruction in all of school and college education, and all our CCS have grown up with extensive exposure to spoken and written English.....Our intensive training program ensures that all CCS who get into production are excellently placed to interact with global customers in exemplary English (Daksh, 2002).

There appears to be an irreversible relationship between proficiency in English and earnings in the new world order of globalization, which in India is associated with information technology and computer expertise. English in this computer-dominated globalized India is perceived as the *sine qua non* for success. However, as access to both English language and computer skills are not universally available, a new *digital divide* based on *i*-knowledge and *e*-knowledge has been created. This is also, in effect, a divide between English and Hindi at the national level and between English and other major Indian languages at the regional levels. The current loss of status of the main national official language of India, Hindi vis-à-vis English, the associate official language was emphatically lamented by

Mr. Jaswant Singh, former External Affairs Minister of India while speaking at the launch of a Hindi portal in New Delhi:

We cannot expect others to bail out Hindi. We should do something about increasing the sex appeal of Hindi.... Hindi has been roaming around as an orphan. We need to give greater self-respect. Only then, Hindi will rule the world.... Such a big Hindi-speaking population and Hindi is still nowhere. That is a big lacuna. (The Hindustan Times, December 26, 2001).

Often seemingly patriotic and perhaps, somewhat romantic moan, Mr. Singh was making a realistic assessment of the evolving relationship between the two main contenders in the Indian constitution: Hindi, the national official language and English, the associate national official language. The arrival of the E-age and Globalization has endowed English with a 'sex-appeal' that Singh thought Hindi lacks. The appeal of English has transformed youngsters' job opportunities in India and helped them acquire a place among the elite, often called *India's whiz kids*.

This recent surge in the functional importance of English and the resultant setback for the institutional establishment of Hindi as the preferred pan-Indian language has been a cause for concern for the speakers and protagonists of Hindi. Articulating her concern on globalization, subjugating Indian languages, Rukmini B. Nair, Linguist and Poet, IIT, Delhi, writes, "*When we speak of globalization destroying the Indian languages, the real villain we have in mind is, in fact, the English language. As the main vehicle of the world trade and the voice of America, people aspire to this 'power and money' tongue even when they resist it*".

In the words of Bill Bryson, "About 300 million people in the world speak English and the rest want to speak it." It is this allure of English as a *life-style language* that we fear might strangulate the other languages of India in the same way that Coke and Pepsi have driven out market competitors. (*The Economic Times*, January 12, 2005). By assessing the current trend, Dilip Chitre, writer and commentator, has given a guesstimate that in the next five to ten years the number of English speakers in Mumbai and Shanghai will surpass English speakers in America. In other words, Asia will transform the global English language.

The preference for English over the mother tongue, be it Hindi or any other Indian languages, is continually echoed in debates on language choice, medium of instruction and initial literacy in India. Clearly, English seems to be expanding at the cost of Hindi and other Indian languages. It seems Indian children, wherever they can manage or afford it, are preferring education through and in English.

Sharma (2000) raises the controversial debate about whether or not English should be removed from the Indian scene, and points to the reality of the omnipotence of English:

The main issue is whether English will be banished or not. English is the language of modern commerce. It is the age of globalization. In India, the maximum investment is that of the Americans. In the universities, the influence of American culture is increasing. Irrespective of the discipline, the intellectuals look to America for directions. It is not only the natural science journals but even the social science journals are published in English. Historians, social scientists, scientists and others, whatever their ideas, their research papers are written and read in English. (Sharma, 2000:14; translated from Hindi by S.K.Verma). He deplores the duplicity of the politicians when he said, "To collect the votes from the public, they talk about making indigenous languages as official languages. In reality, in their own contexts their language of interaction is generally English".

The sociolinguistic reality of English in India and its vitality not only in formal domains but also in informal interactional contexts sends alarm signals to Hindi speakers, especially to the intellectuals and the politicians. Reading through these extracts from the articles by the Hindi literate, it is eminently clear that the Hindi-speaking community is profoundly aware of the intrusion of English in the home discourse not only between speakers from the same generation but also across generations. However, despite their opposition to English, total, partial or half-hearted, they accept the ironic popularity of English in the elite homes. Even those who think they are planning Hindi-English bilingualism in the home environment find themselves and their children beleaguered by the *mixed code*, often called *Hinglish*. Ironically, the opponents of English and of the shift towards English in the speech of the younger generation are quite unaware of their own speech patterns, which eminently exemplify this. They do not realize that in the process of language transmission they are raising their children in a *mixed-code* environment. The grip of English and the claw of the mixed-code are so strong that it would be unrealistic to reverse the situation, which Gandhiji noticed so many years ago. As Fasold (1984:206), quoting Gumperz (1977:3) correctly observes, "No matter how profound the prejudice against it, metaphorical switching is common among the very people who are most critical of it".

As globalization has arrived with intense competition among some of the English-speaking countries in the inner circle - U.K., the U.S.A. and Australia, they try to promote and sell their certificates and diplomas by selling various types of 'language proficiency tests' like the TOEFL, Cambridge Young Learners and so on. This has become a money-spinning enterprise for examination and assessment giants from the core native-English speaking countries. These tests are the same tests that are taken by thousands of candidates around the world. For the young and teenager consumers targeted by this 'Test industry' in countries like India, the certificates and diplomas are perceived as badges of status carrying rewards and as essential entry requirements by overseas universities. The market forces compel aspiring youths to recognize the international value of these certificates and work towards achieving the credits.

Graddol (1997) predicted that the number of ESL/ ESOL/EFL speakers in the new millennium would outnumber the native speakers of English. The question, which can be put forward, is, ‘Will the native custodians of English from the *inner circle* accept the legitimacy of ESL when EFL has become a commodity which is selling well among the privileged few?’ The new brochure of the British Council, the traditional custodian of British English in India, made a bold and startling statement:

A new British Council in the new India: We will be spending more money in India, modernizing our lending libraries in eleven cities, designing a new kind of library for the internet age, reshaping the New Delhi centre to enable you to study online, improve your English, join in video-conference debates, watch a play or just borrow a book....The new India will be driven by its youth and will lead in technology, an ‘India unbound’, where creativity and energy are released. The new British Council puts the resources of the U.K. within the reach of the confident, ambitious and professional young people who are going to shape tomorrow’s India (The British Council, New Delhi: 2002).

The British Council, in the 1950s, contributed to the setting up of India’s first national ESL centre, Central Institute of English (CIE). The CIEFL, as it is known today, gradually moved away from its original ideology of Received Pronunciation and developed the concept of ELT in India and a model of Indian English, vaguely defined as General Indian English (GIE). However, in the 1990s, globalization inspired the British Council to bring British English back to India as a hot saleable commodity to the privileged Indian youths.

From the point of view of the socio-cultural contexts and a pedagogical concern, after de-colonization, English in India was given the status of a second language. The pedagogical and political arguments were in favour of the ‘*Indianization of English*’ (Kachru, 1982), of treating English as ‘*Swadeshi English*’ (Verma, 1976), and of striving towards the norms and standards of Standard Indian English. English Institutes were set up in various urban centres to train teachers and textbook writers to meet the needs and demands of the learners of English as a second language. This was one way of securing authenticity for the Indianness of Indian English. After more than fifty years of raising English like an Indian baby, the wind of globalization, liberalization, and free-market economy seems to be sweeping away the insecure baby for the EFL changeling. This ideological and socio-cultural distinction between EFL and ESL that India has had to contend with after independence has had pedagogical ramifications too in curriculum design, tests and assessments.

The teaching of English to children of primary school stage has been on the increase in recent years in India. There has been a phenomenal growth of English-medium private schools, which contributes to the promotion and return of the native-speaker-intelligibility paradigm in the setting up of call centres in metropolitan cities. The job advertisements of the call centres stress the qualification in English, so that candidates should ‘have exceptional

written and oral communication skills in English and be proficient on the Internet and Computers (Daksh 2002:2). The anxiety on the part of the call centre managers has led them to train Indians in their (British or American) dialect and accent. The boom in call centres has given a boost to the traditional British-American turf rivalry because the majority of the firms are from the USA while India is traditionally a British English zone.

The consequences of the ethno-linguistic strategies used by young aspirants on the job market and the values to these accents and dialects on locally grown Indian English(es) will be difficult to predict at this stage. Either what one could say, however, is that the opportunity to 'cross over' and adopt the linguistic ethnicity of the British or the Americans will be available to the 'chosen few' in the outer circle. One can also say that Indian English, although marginalized by the new comers in 'new India', would continue to prosper in the official and public arena in the urban areas.

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