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TEXT-CONSTRUCTION, REGISTER-SHIFTING AND SOCIAL PRAGMATICS IN INDIAN ENGLISH

Esterino Adami

The reaction of native English speakers to such “deviant” communicative styles and rhetorical devices has not been one of acceptance or understanding, as exemplified by the use of attitudinally marked terms such as Latinity, phrase-mongering, polite diction, moralistic tone, or bookishness. Such labels, however meaningful, ignore the fact that in South Asian English the text and the context are nativized in order to make the text “meaningful” in new situations in which it functions.

Braj Kachru, *The Alchemy of English* (1986)

1. Introduction: Prestige, Style and Discourse Analysis in Non-Varieties of English

In the complex arena of World Englishes, the emergence of Indian English as an autonomous (and prestigious) linguistic variety is today acknowledged by the scientific community. Brought to the fore, primarily, by the rich literary productions of Indian authors, it is analysed through both linguistic and cultural tools. However, whereas much attention is dedicated to the strategies operating within literary genres such as code-mixing, code-shifting, or innovative processes of word-formation, non-literary genres still constitute an often unexplored area, in which social, cultural and linguistic elements mingle together to pursue communicative acts¹. In this essay, I intend to investigate the tension between the need for intelligibility and the localised language choice: namely, in what terms do texts in Indian English manage to establish a link with the local/global community? Given the fundamental role of English as a world lingua franca, it is evident that speakers of Indian English perceive their own variety as a powerful tool for accessing

¹ There are, of course, some important exceptions; see, for instance, Alessandro Monti and Sara Bianchi (eds.), *Percorsi di Flessibilità dell'Indian English*, L'Harmattan Italia, Turin, 2007, and also Esterino Adami, “Indian English: A Pukka Language”, in Oriana Palusci (ed.), *English But Not Quite the Same. Locating Linguistic Diversity*, forthcoming.

global communication, in areas as diverse as international business, commercial activities and political or scientific contacts².

I shall here focus on the tension between the need for clearness in scientific and formal discourse and the outcomes of nativization of linguistic forms, as a result of local sociocultural and sociolinguistic influences. As a whole, non-literary genres connected with scientific and formal discourse tend to conform to prescribed conventions, and therefore, unlike fiction for example, they display a lesser frequency of linguistic deviation or stylistic variation. However, this general simplification does not hold true with reference to discursive processes rooted in strong indigenous cultures, since it is possible to identify cases marked by the discrepancy between discourse practice (viz., text-production) and discourse conventions (viz., the situation, institutional and societal context). In this paper, I will take into account some case studies drawn from different domains, such as academic discourse and tourism, and then reflect on the concept of Indian English as a “multi-modular” language.

Before analysing some selected authentic pieces of language in use³, I would like to further stress the full endorsement of Indian English not only as one of the South Asian Englishes, but also as an “official” language of India (the technical definition from the Indian Constitution reads “co-official language”). In the evaluation of the main characteristics of non-native varieties, the wide category of registers, seen as the language typologies that speakers employ for successfully performing communicative acts, is often overlooked: if register works according to three specific dimensions (field, tenor and mode), the cultural contextualisation does play a fundamental role and thus cannot be misunderstood. Indian English is frequently described as a highly irregular, fossilised and old-fashioned code, but it has to be collocated within a specific sociolinguistic arena in which, as Kachru reminds us, the “native rhetorical styles are then imposed on an ‘alien’ language which results in functional and communicative varieties in South Asian English distinct from other Englishes”⁴. The same view is adopted by D’Souza⁵ in her attempt to critically deconstruct the clichés of non-native varieties like Indian English, frequently devaluated or even ignored by researchers. The features of the texts I am going to deal with are representative of this particular variety and, as such, have to be analysed so to disclaim certain patronising linguistic attitudes.

² The tension that permeates the clash between local varieties and standard forms, namely the pregnant notion of identity against the need/desire of mutual intelligibility, constitutes a core issue in the exploration of World Englishes, and sometimes generates ideological interpretations. See, for instance, Maurizio Gotti, “English Across Communities and Domains: Globalising Trends and Intercultural Conflicts”, in Marina Bondi and Nick Maxwell (eds.), *Cross-Cultural Encounters: Linguistic Perspectives*, Officina Edizioni, Rome, 2005, pp. 11-32.

³ For privacy and textual reasons, I edited some of the texts I deal with here, since they contain sensitive personal data.

⁴ Braj B. Kachru, *The Alchemy of English*, Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1986, p. 43.

⁵ See Jean D’Souza, “Indian English. Some Myths, Some Realities”, 1997, now reprinted in Kingsley Bolton and Braj Kachru (eds.), *World Englishes. Critical Concepts in Linguistics*. Routledge, London/New York, Vol I, pp. 311-323.

2. Indian English Across Academic Genres.

Academic discourse operates within the scientific community and is characterised by the principles of precision, clearness, monoreferentiality and conciseness, which regulate the typology of text registers to be employed. However, if we assume the Hallidayan interpretation of language change, grounded upon the notions of user (thus considering variables such as social background, geographical location, gender and age) and use (the selection of options available to speakers), we could argue that the rhetorical strategies adopted by academics writing in Indian English are characterized more by questions of style, rather than by tight conformity to prescribed norms. I am focusing on two particular text-types that often occur together: calls for papers and academic résumés (or bio-data information). Calls for papers are aimed at grabbing attention from researchers, persuading them to contribute articles or other forms of participation for conferences, collections of papers or other projects, while academic résumés shortly introduce book editors or project coordinators, praising their scientific authority in order to convince the prospective participant about the importance of the research.

Let us consider the following call for paper, in hybridized letter form, concerning a literary project devoted to Doris Lessing, written by a Gujarati lecturer in English:

Dear Sir/Madam,

You will be probably surprised to receive this letter of mine so wholly unexpected. I was educated at Rajasthan University, Jaipur and Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh and wrote my doctoral dissertation on [topic follows]. Besides editing books, [titles follow], I have contributed research papers to various national and international literary journals and books on English, American and Indian literature in English. My papers were read at the International Congress at Salinas, Hawaii, New York and Honolulu. I have also translated T. S. Eliot's [titles follow] into Hindi, which is being taught at M.A. Hindi at [name of University follows].

Doris Lessing is a prolific writer and her name had been short listed thrice for Nobel Prize. But this year she has been awarded the world's greatest and the most prestigious award The Nobel Prize for Literature.

Buoyed by my personal interest in Doris Lessing and her writings, I have decided to bring out a book of some significance both for scholars and students of English literature. With this intention in mind, I am prompted to extend this invitation to you for your participation in a project like this. I am hopeful that you might be interested in contributing an essay to this volume giving that literary flavour of scholarship to this collection of essays which would have otherwise eluded it. If you are interested in participating in this scholastic endeavour, I would appreciate hearing from you.

The tentative deadline for the submission of manuscripts is [date follows].

If you have any suggestions which you feel may improve the quality of the book, please feel free in writing it to me. I am open to suggestions.

I hope you won't frustrate me by saying 'NO'.

Looking forward to hearing from you soon.

Hope this finds you all well.

With thanks and kind regards.

Sincerely yours

[signature follows]

Through a close reading of this letter, I am now trying to observe to what extent nativization characteristically functions, though it is true that, in general, texts pertaining to domain-specific English, especially in the field of professional communication, are inclined to standardisation⁶. Since calls for papers are dominated by conative force, namely they wish to affect the reader and convince him/her to do something, they can share some features with other genres, such as advertisements and other forms of promotional literature, and therefore I am here employing some of the considerations formulated by V. K. Bathia in his analysis of job applications in Indian English⁷.

The first paragraph introduces the author, and, although the very opening line mitigates the strength of the whole section, and asserts the academic career of the writer, specifically mentioning details such as university education, publications, translations and teaching activity. This initial part conforms to standard editorial norms, but if we turn to the following paragraphs, idiosyncratic linguistic choices emerge and, subtly, reveal the varying degrees of transparency or opaqueness of the text, apart from the author's individual style. The nominal string "giving that literary flavour of scholarship" seems to suggest almost lyrical tones, whereas the short compact statements in the end of the letter (a series of one-line paragraphs) engage both addressee and addresser in a kind of negotiation: the writer, while constructing a sound account of his "fictional" self via the first paragraph, pragmatically declares to be flexible ("I am open to suggestion") to request the reader's collaboration. Furthermore, in his attempt to approach and persuade the addressee, he explicitly operates on the functional register by moving to a nearly informal level, suggesting "I hope you won't frustrate me by saying 'NO'". We should also notice the recourse to foregrounding through the graphic device of putting the negative adverb in capital letters. The standard complimentary close is then preceded and reinforced by three lines, emphatically embellishing the whole textual structure.

On first sight, the letter does not overtly upturn standard writing norms, but cunningly it discloses a particular stylistic orientation: rather than drawing on hybrid lexical stocks of Indian English, what characterises this call for papers refers to the area of style, as an element linked to cultural identity. The flowery quality of Indian English lies in and is justified by its historical stratification spanning over different cultures and languages: therefore, rather than downgrading this

⁶ This is not valid for forms of personal communication, such as private letters or emails; see Raja Ram Mehrotra, "English in Private Letters in India", in *English Today*, Vol., 18, No. 4, October 2004, pp. 39-44.

⁷ See V. K. Bathia, "Nativization of Job Application in South Asia", in Robert J. Baumgardner (ed.), *South Asian English*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1996, pp. 158-173.

specific trait of functional register, it would be more appropriate to assess it as a trace of diachronic and synchronic transformations. At the same time, the peculiar application of verbose style cannot be considered only as a heavy legacy from the colonial past and, since all languages change through time and space, it is bound to (slowly, given a certain principle of conservatism of English in India) evolve, in spite of the criticisms of language purists and detractors, as a significant discursive strategy.

Typically used for lists of contributors in publications or books' blurbs, the academic résumé (or bio-data information, usually being an extract from a longer curriculum vitae) follows some of the textual patterns we have observed in the previous sample, in particular the informational function, e.g. illustrating the academic achievements of the writer. Yet, sometimes it also implies a promotional, or more specifically self-promotional orientation, aiming at positively 'impressing' the reader:

'Litera scripta manet'

About myself

I am Dr. [name follows], a gold medallist in B.A. and M.A. from Patna University, Bihar. I have been teaching English in Women's College, [place name and name of institution follow] for the past fifteen years. I have to my credit one book, [title follows], published by [name of publisher follows]. The second book [title follows] authored by me is in the process of being published by the same publishers. My areas of interest are American, Indian and South African literature. I have contributed many papers in various national & international journals. I am the Editor/Resident Editor for Bihar for [publisher follows].

In its rhetorical design, this brief text does not manifest deviation at the lexico-grammatical level, but strikes the reader in terms of subjective construction. Within the limited compass of a hundred words, a few peculiar linguistic elements, such as the catchy Latin epigraph, used to strengthen prestige and metonymically represent the "world of culture", or the self-definition as a "gold medallist", which constitutes an unusual vocabulary choice specifically linked to cultural reference (in India, gold medals are offered to celebrate special accomplishments, such as academic awards), substantiate this ideological view, implying the "power" of the author as an exponent of the scholarly community.

According to Norman Fairclough, "doing one's job entails 'playing the game' (or various connected games), and what may feel like a mere rhetoric to get things done quickly and easily becomes a part of one's professional identity. Self-promotion is perhaps becoming a routine, naturalized strand of various academic activities, and of academic identities"⁸. However, in the Indian English context, it is customary for young researchers not to show off their attainments, as a sign of esteem for more experienced academics, and therefore a certain balance regulates the tense divergence between the international propensity towards the 'marketization' and ideological self-

⁸ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, Longman, Harlow, England, 1995, p. 153.

promotion of these texts and the well-rooted sociocultural act of upholding tradition, via the implicit request of collaboration: the writer of this piece simultaneously praises their academic reliability (through the establishment of identity discourse) and encourages a response (that is, a form of collaboration) from the reader, but also celebrates their Indian background in form of a mixed autobiographical account. Thus, we could interpret the rhetorical strategies intertwined within these discourse practices as instantiations of self-glorification, adversary glorification and self-degradation, according to V. K. Bathia's framework, whereby illocutionary acts lead to perlocutionary effects, namely with a shift from the speaker/writer's intention to the pragmatic effect.

3. Journeying the Language(s): Indian English for Tourism.

Another area that I would like to examine concerns the domain of tourism, whose texts are rooted in cultural contexts and hence display a high percentage of loanwords. Far from offering an "exoticising" point of view, borrowings exhibit the vivid dynamicity of English as a non-native variety in expressing and combining different cultural traditions. The data I examine come from two brochures respectively titled *Hyderabad This Fortnight* and *Primetime Prism*, both published in 2001⁹. In the light of their promotional nature, of course the two texts are structured so as to perform referential and informative functions, while striving to appeal to the general public and provide information about accommodation, transport, shopping, sightseeing and so on. However, since they are intended for both Indian and foreign readers, they have to mediate the cultural values and artistic heritage they wish to represent with the principle of intelligibility of English as a global language for tourism and business. As a consequence, linguistic variation mainly characterises the lexical level in specific sociocultural domains such as, for instance, religion (e.g. references to practices and places of worship), food (local dishes and ingredients), geography (place-names), fashion (types of clothes and accessories) or art (monuments). I shall briefly take into consideration some items of vocabulary.

In the sentence "Irani chai under the Charminar and a drive on the Tank bund" (PP, 66), the author uses the word *chai*, which by and large refers to tea, or more specifically milky tea brewed with spices and herbs like cardamom, ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves. It habitually appears in compounds such as *masala chai*, offered by street vendors, called *chai wallahs*, whereas at times it is even employed in the tautological form *chai tea*. Etymologically, it derives from the Chinese word *chá*, which functions as a root in many languages such as Hindi, Urdu, Turkish, and

⁹ See *Hyderabad This Fortnight*, February 2001 (abbreviate HTF, with page reference), and *Primetime Prism*, volume v, number 8, 2001 (abbreviated PP, with page reference).

Russian. A chart providing general information about Andhra Pradesh states that its population is about “6.5 crores” (PP, 8). The meaning of this Hindi term is “a specific numerical unit equal to 10 million or 100 lakhs”¹⁰, and in the light of its frequent occurrence in common speech it operates as a cultural-bound word. In the field of clothing, we could quote lexemes such as *chooridar* (“working men dressed in chooridars or jeans”, PP, 8), another Hindi term whose semantic sphere regards tightly fitting trousers and incorporates the item *choori*, namely “bangles” (Hindi *cūrī*). Since *chooridars* are excessively long, the final result is that they look like a series of bangles, hence its lexical origin.

Other types of linguistic diversity affecting Indian English include unusual spelling (“sight seeing”, HTF, 13) or neologisms (“auto rickshaw”, HTF, 4; “imported shoppee”, HTF, 35), but to approach the complex sociolinguistic scenario of India, we should remember not only how its philological pathway mirrors the morphological transformations operated by different linguistic codes at work through time (Sanskrit, Arab, Persian, Portuguese, English), but also the interference of vernacular languages influencing the effective learning and use of English in India. However, the main linguistic relevance of these brochures concerns the stylistic level – in particular the meshing power of the code to construct a bookish and longwinded language – aptly employed to induce people to visit Hyderabad. Ultimately, the intended target (which includes foreign tourists) brings the authors to tone down the linguistic “extravagancy” of Indian English, here working as a lingua franca for international communication.

If we remain in the field of tourism, it is significant to notice that in 2008 a Lonely Planet pocket-sized publication was presented as an introductory tool for Indian languages and cultures¹¹. A semi-academic text, it aims to cover several semantic areas, such as society (home, family, education), transport (driving, holidaying), food and beverages, types of entertainment (Bollywood, literature, theatre), and also offers some insights into the linguistic mechanisms that generate the uniqueness of Indian English. I will set out a selection of examples taken from this source in tabular form:

Structure	Example	Meaning	Notes
Phrasal verbs (compound verb phrases)	To carry out / to return back (p. 26)	To carry / to return	atypical addition of preposition (to carry + out); semantic reinforcement (to return + back)

¹⁰ Paroo Nihalani, R. K. Tongue, Priya Hosali, *Indian and British English*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000, p. 60.

¹¹ *Indian English Language and Culture*, Victoria (Australia), Lonely Planet Publications, 2008. References to this text are incorporated in the tables with page number.

Compounding: 1. Noun morphology	Cooliedom (p. 27)	Coolie = ‘porter’ (+suffix dom = the state of being a coolie)	borrowing: <i>coolie</i> (<i>qulī</i> from Hindi/Turkish)
2. Collocation	Key bunch (p. 27)	A bunch of keys	deviant type of premodification
3. Plural	A pile of litters / a room full of furnitures (p. 28)	A heap of litter / a room full of furniture	odd treatment of mass nouns
Word order	What you would like to eat? My all friends are waiting (p. 28)	What would you like to eat? All my friends are waiting.	lack of interrogative inversion; non-standard adjectival construction
Tag questions	He is very weak, isn’t it? (p. 28)	He is very weak, isn’t he?	all-purpose tag ‘isn’t it’

In a light-hearted manner, the Lonely Planet *Indian English. Language & Culture* guide strives to help visitors wishing to overcome the cultural shock one experiences when travelling across India. It includes not only word banks spanning over plenty of categories (newspapers & magazines, sports, festivals), but it extensively tackles other sections such as slang, gesture and body language, ‘put-downs’ (things not to say), acronyms and abbreviations, sometimes accompanied by maps and pictures. Here are a few more examples:

Category	Example	Notes/Meaning
Gestures and body language (p. 39)	click of tongue	used to negate or sympathise
Address terms (p. 36)	miss/Missus	title of respect for a woman or colloquial term for ‘wife’
Abbreviations (p. 163)	fundoo	a fun guy
Put-downs (p. 158)	a real cartoon	no reference to any animated character but slang for ‘idiot’

This concise guide certainly does not aspire to cultural and anthropological precision, although, for example, it dedicates a chapter to the 22 official languages of India (from Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati to Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Oriya, Telugu and so forth). However, it can also contribute to more intense research via its rich supply of interesting linguistic and cultural data for academic analysis.

Let us shortly return to the issue of unassertive tag questions, for instance, which incidentally occur almost regularly in several of the New Englishes. Since these patterns reflect rhetorical and pragmatic orientations, they cannot superficially be labelled as mere grammar

misuse. As a matter of fact, considering examples of tags in vernacular Indian English, Rakesh Bhatt stresses that their atypical construction “is constrained by cultural requirements of politeness. More specifically, these undifferentiated tags are governed by the politeness of non-imposition. They serve positive politeness functions, signalling deference and acquiescence”¹². Therefore, we observe again how cultural mechanisms determine, or at least deeply influence, linguistic and stylistic tactics, sometimes carrying an ideological impact as well: the case of *cooliedom* is significant, as it also used to describe the condition of maltreatment that indentured workers experienced on plantations. Now the term chiefly refers to railway porters, although it is still marked by social connotations.

4. Concluding Remarks: a “Multi-Modular” Language?

Diatopic and diastratic language change can be sited along a cline of proficiency, from nearly native-like usage to creolised/pidginised forms at the opposite end. What emerges concerns a distinctive type of language ecology endowed with a stratified continuum of competences: the more writers wish to master discursal and rhetorical strategies to accomplish formality, precision and intelligibility, the more these varieties will adhere to standard World English. In the case of academic English, such choice seems to be natural, bearing in mind the international dimension of university research and scientific progress, although a certain lack of restrictions is still allowed, especially with the so-called soft subjects, e.g. Humanities. With Indian English for tourism, instead, a greater stylistic freedom operates, probably covering more traits of the cline. To tackle the node of multiple linguistic/cultural skills, N. Krishnaswamy and Archana S. Burde suggest introducing the definition of Indian English as a “multi-modular language”, highlighting the code-switching ability to perform a wide range of different communicative tasks, collocated within specific socio-cultural contexts. This approach does not merely consider strategies such as code-shifting and loanwords, but it emphasizes the fluidity and negotiability of intercultural performance, viz. the array of social and cultural roles speakers/writers assume when they actively participate to speech events.

The two scholars hypothesize the case of an Indian speaker from the upper-middle class, educated in the Sanskrit tradition, who uses English for professional purposes, Tamil in the household milieu, and Hindi or Telugu to establish social relations. His oral and written text-construction will benefit from this sociolinguistic and sociocultural network, which allows him to manage multiple literacies. In stressing the uniqueness of Indian multilingualism, Krishnaswamy

¹² Rakesh M. Bhatt, “Indian English: Syntax”, in Rajed Mesthrie (ed.), *Varieties of English. Africa, South and Southeast Asia*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin & New York, 2008, p. 552.

and Burde claim that it is difficult to deconstruct these communicative mechanisms, and thus more research is needed, although traditional tools derived from linguistics often do not manage to explain the core principles shaping this type of linguistic behaviour. With regard to their imaginary case study described above, they even affirm that “he operates within the various ‘modules’ without any sense of conflict or contradiction because he has compartmentalized his life; he lives his ‘English-life’ in one of those modules, maybe out of necessity. The way he lives his many lives, including his linguistic lives, cannot be comprehended in terms of notions like ‘restricted’ and ‘elaborated’ codes, or ‘deficit’ and ‘difference’ and Western pragmatics has no tools for handling such ‘multi-modular’ phenomena”¹³.

Although the “multi-modular” hypothesis may represent an oversimplified interpretation of a very complex sociolinguistic context, nonetheless it can enrich a fuller discussion of language and identity, in particular when English in India is reshaped so as to accommodate local cultural values, and consequently becomes a non-native variety, through processes of appropriation and abrogation. The friction between the desire to transform the English language to suit new social and cultural surroundings, especially in postcolonial contexts, and the necessity of a global language for international communication can result in different types of reaction. However, as David Crystal suggests, “the pull imposed by the need for identity, which has been making New Englishes increasingly dissimilar from British English, could be balanced by a pull imposed by the need for intelligibility, on a world scale, which will make them increasingly similar, through the continued use of Standard English”¹⁴. The textual excerpts I have presented here stand in transit between two opposing forces (identity vs. intelligibility), and consequently a particular kind of mediation is realised via register choice and rhetorical strategies.

The question of linguistic transparency or opaqueness in the contrastive analysis of English varieties remains a fundamental issue in the transactions between “glocal” communities. In closing, I would like to mention a recent survey dedicated to the response of educated British speakers of English towards the use of selected examples of Indian English¹⁵. The corpus included lexical items and phrases such as “face-cut” (“her face-cut is very impressive”, meaning “facial profile), “source” (“you cannot get a good job without some source”, meaning “influential contact or backing), “chaste” (“he speaks chaste Hindi”, meaning “pure or undefiled”), “to do the needful” (“they requested the Principal to do the needful”, meaning “to do what is necessary”). A plethora of different language attitudes emerged, showing varying degrees of intelligibility, distributed along a

¹³ N. Krishnaswamy & Archana S. Burde, *The Politics of Indians’ English*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1998, p. 154.

¹⁴ David Crystal, *English as a Global Language*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003 (2nd edition), p. 178.

¹⁵ Raja Ram Mehrotra, “A British Response to Some Indian English Usages”, in *English Today*, 75, Vol. 19, No. 3, July 2002, pp. 19-21.

cline of comprehension. However, to come full circle, intelligibility and identity constitute two notions that have to be sited within the framework of suitability, namely the capacity to fulfil communicative functions primarily *in vivo*. And Indian English, with its power to structure texts according to the environmental requirements by elaborating registers and vocabulary, functions as the apt code within the multifaceted linguistic ecology of India.

In this paper I have dealt with examples of non-literary texts, but in conclusion, given the special creative power of English in Indian fiction, I will turn to a 2008 novel by Aravind Adiga, in which the autodiegetic narrator writes to the Chinese Prime Minister, with the promise of revealing to him the “real” current socio-economic situation of India. The first letter starts in this way: “Sir. Neither you nor I can speak English, but there are some things that can be said only in English”¹⁶. Apparently this opening touches only the superficiality of the multilingual complexity of globalised postmodernity, but in truth it subtly synthesises the in-between position of English in India, simultaneously praised and loathed through sentiments of schizoglossia: by delegating the authorial power to the non-native language, the novelist through the literary persona of Balaram Halwai constructs a text and a story that revolve round the local, social and cultural conflicts, and therefore endorses again the centrality of English in India.

¹⁶ Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger*, Atlantic Books, London, 2008, p. 3.