

Effect of Culture and Society on Language (Sociology of Language in India)

Language is a social phenomenon. It is a part of our social world. According to K.L. Pike (1957), it holds the key to “social nucleation”. A language can tell us a lot about what is important in a particular culture. For example, if we look at the vocabulary of a language we find a great deal of elaboration in words describing certain phenomena, while in other areas there is no any elaboration at all. The Eskimo language, for example, has a vocabulary rich in words describing details of the Arctic environment. In one Eskimo language there are 12 separate and unrelated words for wind and 22 words for snow. That means 22 different kinds of snow are recognized in the Eskimo culture.

Through the process of enculturation a person masters a culture and learns to speak a particular language. According to American linguist-Anthropologist, **Edward Sapir** (1924), the entire knowledge of world’s culture lies in language. He holds the view that the vocabulary of a language is an encoding of that culture’s cognitive categories. **Stephen A Tyler** (1969) in his edited volume on ‘Cognitive Anthropology’ has argued that the reality of a language is a socio-cultural product and hence relative. He says, “Culture is that complex hole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs and another capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”.

India has been referred to as a ‘sociolinguistic giant’. In terms of social complexities and cultural diversities, India is more than a state, larger than a nation, bigger than a country. It has continental characteristics. Its anthropological, sociological and cultural range and diversities are more like those in the continents of Africa, Europe or America rather than to any single territorial sovereignty.

India comprises myriad streams of cultures, about 18 languages and 2000 dialects, a dozen ethnic groups, 7 religious communities fragmented into many sects, castes and sub-castes, that inhabit its 58 socio-cultural sub-regions, which within the framework of seven natural geographic regions exhibit distinct internal homogeneity and external identity (Dholani and Singh 1996).

Being the second most populous and territorially the sixth largest country in the world, India stands out as a unique contemporary experiment house of building a new identity. Its population is bigger then the total combined population of three continents – Latin America, Africa and Australia. Historically, India has been one of the greatest confluences of cultural strands, a laboratory of racial intermixing of cross-fertilization of religious ideas and secular thought of co-existence of languages and dialects. According to the news in ‘Dainik Bhaskar’ (6 March 2006) the speakers of English are very rare in India but their number is more than the speakers of English in any other country of the world. Thus it is interesting to make a study of various variety of language used by different races of India in the vast geographic regions.

Emile Durkheim's(1938) work was based on the premise that social phenomena are autonomous and their relationships should be studied in their own right without reference to biology, geography or any other body of data or theory. Social anthropology is the outcome of the impact of the Durkheimian school of thought, followed by the British anthropology. The cultural anthropology in the contemporary situation refers to the Americanization of this discipline. **Radcliffe Brown** (1952) following the principles of Durkheim, explained the social institutions of Andamanese society by identifying their specific functions in maintaining the structure of that society. In the development of social anthropology, **Bronislaw Malinowski's** (1983) works and publications are very important. He developed a functionalistic approach of his own. Anthropological linguists have so far not made the study of use of English language in different socio-cultural regions. It is a new type of approach in which we shall see how the same language is spoken differently in different socio-cultural sub- regions. It would be worthwhile to undertake a new expedition in this field.

Today our culture includes more than its medieval form. It has widened its dimensions in the last two hundred years, in the wake of the encounter with European civilization and the mighty sweep of the national liberation movement. With the result five different types of English are spoken in modern India due to regional variations, with the promotion of science, technology and the rationalistic temper.

English has undergone nativization as changes have occurred in its phonology, vocabulary and grammar, and now it is recognised as a distinct variety of English i.e., (General) Indian English (GIE). But besides GIE, there exist quite a few distinct non-standard varieties of Indian English as well, i.e. the types English spoken by the uneducated speakers (such as butlers, servants, taxi-drivers, small shopkeepers, peddlers) and semi-educated speakers (such as clerks, etc.). Indians 'accultured' the English language in their typical way. In other words they modified it in accordance with the requirements of the Indian culture. No doubt, this phenomenon is not unique to one colony alone but is typical of all situations of language contact. The language gradually came into contact with various cultures; with the result a number of local varieties of English were produced. This paper seeks to discuss the different linguistic, cultural and social aspects of the non-standard varieties of Indian English.

Hugo Schuchardt (1891), a German linguist, who was passionately devoted to the study of the use of English by the natives of India and the Eurasians, identified the following five distinctive types of non-standard varieties of English used in India:

Butler English of Madras

Pidgin English of Bombay

Boxwallah English of Upper India (spoken by itinerant peddlers)

Cheechee English, spoken everywhere by Eurasians

Baboo English, spoken in Bengal and elsewhere (38-64).

4.1 Butler English

When the English merchants landed on the shores of India, they found hordes of natives willing to wait on them. The Indians could not speak the English language but they were always ready to try. With the result the Englishmen, in their attempt to help the Indians, simplified their speech. As the head of the domestic staff of a European household in India used to be called 'butler', the English spoken by him came to known as 'Butler English'. Butler English has been defined as "the broken English spoken by native servants in the Madras Presidency which is not very much better than the Pidgin English of China... The oddest characteristic about the jargon is (or was) that masters used it in speaking to their servants as well as servants to their masters." (Yule and Burnell: 1968)

The generally uneducated English-knowing bilinguals such as (a) guides showing foreign visitors around (b) vendors selling their wares to foreigners frequenting Indian markets (c) the domestic staff of hotels catering to tourists and upper-class Indians (d) the staff of prestigious clubs and other recreation centres and (e) the domestic staff employed in racially mixed or westernised Indian households are ranked at the zero point. Their English is termed Butler English and it is spoken in a very restricted set of domains mainly for communication on limited matters between master and servant. It functions as a link language in domestic situations. Kachru (1969) gives supporting evidence, "In South Asia it is very common to come across users of English who have acquired some control of restricted items of English, but cannot use the language in any serious sense. Some such varieties have been labelled Baboo English, Butler English, Bearer English, Kitchen English."

Schuchardt (1891) has tried to obtain samples of Butler English. The handful of sentences in Madras English, which are sprinkled throughout the text of 'Gup: Indo-English Gossip' do little to improve our knowledge of it:

I all right now, ma'am. Missus want amah for the baby? (p.34)

Master not believe she give 'garley'!

Master not believe she throw knives!

Master now see what that missus doing. (p.45)

Yes ma'am, I speaking English – same as missus. (p.55)

How I telling? English people very clever: can do everything. (p.169)

In Butler English, the verb phrase is generally much simpler than is the case in the standard variety. According to Schuchardt the most characteristic feature of Butler English is the use of the present participle or gerund. This is used primarily for the present and secondarily for the future. Yule and Burnell also report that in this variety of English, present participle is generally used for the future indicative: for instance, "I telling" is used for "I will tell". The following samples of Butler English from Priya Hosali's doctoral thesis illustrate the peculiarities of this type of English:

Sample 1:

Arjuna describes how to make chocolate souffle: "Make for first one make custard. After for mix it up in geltine, keep some five minute, ten minute on the fridge – after white eggs for beating – mix it up. Again put it in the beer – frigidaire – that thing setting all right.... yes. Master like it – that that master friends also like for my food Hyderabad."

Here we find omission of plural suffix. Instead of 'keep some five minute, ten minute on the fridge'; it should be 'keep it for some five or ten minutes in the fridge'. Then, there is omission of the concordial suffix: 'Master like it' is used for 'Master likes it'.

Sample 2:

Mary describes how to make pickle: "All right I can tell. Cut nicely brinjal. Little little piece. Ginger, garlic hm chilly – red chilly, mustard, and eh jira – all want it, grind it in the vinegar. No water. After put the hoil – then put it all the masala, little little slowly fri it – nice smell coming – then you can put the brinjal. Not less oil. Then after is cooking in the hoil make it cold – put it in the bottle.

Sample 3:

Helen gives a brief account of her domestic service: "I been working lot of memsahib. Is all gone London, England, European. You know I working Colonel Palmers... My children you see – four girl married. One girl – not married. She is next house no? Colonel eh Mulchandani house. There she is working my daughter.

Sample 4:

Butler is starting small work. Running-boy: Tennis-boy: Pankh-boy. After I start butler second-boy; dressing boy.

Sample 5:

Mistress: Where do you work?

Servant: I working in Merchandani Sahib house.

Sample 6:

Servant: I go to market yesterday, missy, but no fish.

Mistress: Well go early in the morning tomorrow.

Sample 7:

Mistress: Why didn't you come for work yesterday?

Servant: I sick, my child sick, everybody sick.

Sample 8:

Ayah (Shouting to the children): Don't make noise, don't make noise, Peggy, Jane. I telling missy. Baba log giving me lot of trouble missy.

Mistress: Did the children play in the park?

Servant: Yes Ma'am. They enjoy very much.

Mistress: Did you tell Swamy to come?

Servant: Yes ma'am. I done tell him to come.

The English system has been simplified with regard to pronouns. Thus, the possessive pronoun 'my' is used for the personal pronoun 'I' and vice versa: for instance, 'Because I story' is used for 'because my story'. The use of accusative cases 'me' for the nominative case 'I' was also noted: for instance, 'Me not drinking madam' is used for 'I am not drinking madam'

Butler English differs from General Indian English in syntax as well. In GIE, the negator normally occurs after the auxiliary and before the main verb. But in Butler English, the negator follows the subject and precedes the verb phrases, the auxiliary

being consistently absent: for instance, ‘I no read some picture books’ is used for ‘I do not read any picture books’. The use of double negation was also noted in this variety of English: for instance, ‘No, I didn’t not know son’ is used in place of ‘No, I haven’t got any sons.’

The comparison of the data collected by Priya Hosali in 1980 with the samples quoted from Schuchardt show that the variety has been in existence for over a century. The major pidgin characteristics are: absence of number, absence of tense, absence of copula, omission of article, deletion of preposition, absence of reflexive pronoun.

In Tamil-speaking areas, the influence of Tamil pronunciation cannot be denied. The reason is that most house servants of the Europeans are Tamil. They pronounce ‘every’ as ‘yevry’. As Cladwell has rightly pointed out, “There is a tendency in all the Dravidian languages to pronounce ‘e’ as if it were ‘ye’, and ‘o’ as if it were ‘mo’” However, the use of the present participle (or gerund) for the present cannot be attributed to the influence of Dravidian languages; it can rather be explained as having a universal origin. The Creole dialects tend to substitute the durative present, the more emphatic form, for the simple present.

4.2 Pidgin English

The English of Bombay servants who were generally half-caste Portuguese is referred to as Pidgin English. (*The Times*: April 11, 1882).

4.3 Boxwallah English

The Times (April 11, 1882, p. 8) mentions ‘the curious patois (hardly more intelligible than the ‘Pidgin English’ of servants in Bombay and Madras), that is affected by the itinerant hawkers or boxwallah in Upper India’. We have no further information of this Indian peddlers’ English (box < Hindustani bakas + wala ‘man’).

4.4 Cheechee English

Cheechee (or Chichi) English is spoken by the people of mixed descent – the Eurasians (European+Asian). It is mainly concerned with the question of the pronunciation. According to Yule and Burnell, ‘cheechee’ is a disparaging term applied to half-castes or Eurasians and also to their manner of speech. The word is said to be taken from the Hindi expression of disgust ‘Chee’ (Fie!). The term is however also a kind of onomatopoeia, indicating the mincing pronunciation that often characterises this type of English. Many a time, the Cheechee English speakers use English words/ expressions in an un-English sense as well. The following examples from *Punjab Notes and Queries*, Vol. 2.8 (October 1884) show this characteristic of Cheechee English:

<u>Cheechee English</u>	<u>Standard English</u>
to blow one’s self	to hit one’s self
to get tossed	to be thrown from a horse
to cover	to sleep under a sheet or blanket
to roll a bird	to hit a bird with a stone or pellet
hall-room	parlour

W.F. Sinclair (1889) says, “One can hardly help noticing the various forms of vulgarism or solecism which go in India by the general name of *Chee-chee*. It is not easy to define this, but when you get an Anglo-Indian word that is not in any Asiatic language,

though supposed to be Indian by the European using it, nor in any European language, though supposed to be English by the native using it, you may call that word *chee-chee*.”

4.5 Baboo English

When the East India Company emerged as a political power in India in the early nineteenth century, the administrators of the Company began to feel that they needed a large number of such clerks as can read and write English. As the British Empire had expanded to every nook and corner of the world, it was not feasible for the British to send shiploads of clerks from England to India. Hence, an urgent need to promote English in India had arisen, which ultimately resulted in the origin of Baboo English, i.e. the English language written by the native Indian clerks. The children of small farmers, petty shopkeepers, cooks, ‘ayahs’ (nurses) and the like obtained the basic knowledge of English at such schools as charged no or nominal fees, and as they had become discontented with their traditional professions, they forthwith sought employment as clerks under the British government in India.

It should be noted that Baboo English is not spoken only by a Bengali or in Bengal alone. The term ‘Baboo’ comes from the Hindustani ‘babu’, a name usually applied to a native clerk in Bengal and some parts of Upper India: it is a term of respect equivalent to the English terms like ‘Master’, ‘Mr.’ and ‘Esquire’, Yule and Burnell write in *Hobson-Jobson*: “in Bengal and elsewhere, among Anglo-Indians, it is often used with a slight savour of disparagement, as characterising a superficially cultivated, but too often effeminate, Bengali. And from the extensive employment of the class, to which the term was applied as a title, in the capacity of clerks in English offices, the word has come often to signify ‘a native clerk who writes English’.” The term ‘Baboo English’ implies the latter sense.

The samples of Baboo English can be found in the articles in *The Times* dated 11 April 1882 (p. 8) and 14 April 1882 (p.13). There is another article on ‘Babu English’ in *Chamber’s Journal* of 31 December 1881 (pp 840-2). Again, T.W.J. has come out with some amusing specimens of composition and style in his collection of letters called *Baboo English or Our Mother-tongue as Our Aryan Brethren Understand It*. See the example of one such letter written by a Bachelor degree holder from University of Calcutta:

The extreme stimulus of professional and friendly solicitation has led me to the journey of accomplished advantages to proceed with these elucidatory and critical comments; where in no briscking has been thrown apart to introduce the *prima facie* and useful matters to facilitate the literary pursuits of lily-like capacities. If the aimed point were embraced favourably by the public, all and all-grateful acknowledgements will ride on the jumping border from the very bottom of my heart.

In the above passage, it is very difficult to understand what the writer means. In the Introduction it was written: “The love of display is a very common failing among native students”. This is illustrated in an absurd manner by using long and sometimes obsolete words in place of those of ordinary and everyday use.

In the case of educated and half-educated Indians, we quite often note a tendency to use a European language in as bombastic a way as possible. Of course, I do not want to

say that styles like those upon which this assertion rests are unheard in the case of Europeans; but they are usually confined to one's native language and to declarations of a genial and easy-going nature. As Babu Ramchandra Basu puts it in his article 'The English-speaking Natives of Upper India' in *Indian Evangelical Review* (April 1876: pp. 470-83):

It is an undeniable fact that in speaking and writing English the educated natives, with perhaps a few rare and honorable exceptions, fall into glaring inaccuracies and gross mistakes. They are notorious for making free with and marring the English language, and their English compositions abound with solecisms and errors at which even an ordinarily educated Englishman cannot help laughing. But inaccuracies of expression and faults of diction are in this case unavoidable, and do not indicate on their part either defective education or imperfect knowledge. They are, after all, natives of India, and it is simply absurd to expect them to write English with the ease and grace, the verbal accuracy and idiomatic propriety, which characterize the compositions of an English gentleman of even ordinary education and intelligence.

Given below are some samples from T.W.J.'s collection of letters, *Her Majesty's Indian Subjects*:

Sample 1:

A Baboo tries to excuse the behaviour of one of his subordinates

RESPECTED SIR,

Kindly excuse to this poor man the once more for his this fault. He is not sort of man to be cheek (cheeky) to your honour but being a very fool he not understands the English language therefore he spoke you in such way as to look as impertinent.

Now he is very sorry for the fault which is done by accident, and humbly says no more he will do so again.

For sake of his families be merciful to him. He has lately been blessed by having a child; do not turn his joys into misery and sadness.

Yours obedient,
W.M. PUTTUCK

Sample 2:

An excuse for being absent from office

HONoured AND KINDLY MASTER,

Sir,

I beg to inform for your advice that when I gone at my house in evening time of 25 current, then I became very greatly unwell, so much that it is difficult to explain only by verbal statement. Since 9 of the clock there is too much of pain in my sternmost portion and many movements occurring so that I cannot remain in rest even for the five minutes.

Doctor Baboo has order complete rest in prostrate state also that my foodings will consist of rice and milk without curry or any good dish. He also put hot plaster on bottom part of belly portion, and giving Icy water to check various symptoms which are

prevalent and dangerous. Therefore your honour will excuse for two or three days attendance at office for my recovery to good health.

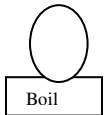
Yours oby,
T.M.N.

Sample 3:

Letter from a Magistrate's Head Clerk

With deep regret and unfeigned sorrowfulness your poor slave approaches his poor tale to the footsteps of your honours throne feeling sure he may meet with forgiveness of his sins from your wisdom and goodness.

Since last two days or more I am much trouble with largest size boil* as per margin on end of my back wherefore my sitting down has become unpleasant in highest degree. Doctor sahib is telling to subdue by poltiss but while the curefullness is being completed how I am to attend your honours outcherry (court house) and discharge myself of the duties? I feel some shame there is no doubt in exposing my private soreness to your honour but truly it is said that necessity has no laws, hence my prayer to excuse this one only and as in duty bound will pray ever and ever until life doth us end.



Yours faithfully,
With deepest regret,
B. Doss

Here are few other collections of leave letters and applications written by people in various places of India....

Sample 4:

Infosys, Bangalore: An employee applied for leave as follows:

Since I have to go to my village to sell my land along with my wife, please sanction me one week leave.

Sample 5:

This is from Oracle Bangalore:

From an employee who was performing the “mundane” ceremony of his ten year old son: “As I want to shave my son’s head, please leave me for two days”.

Sample 6:

Another gem from CDAC. Leave-letter from an employer who was performing his daughter’s wedding: “As I am marrying my daughter, please grant a week’s leave”.

Sample 7:

From H.A.L. Administration Dept.:

“As my mother –in –law has expired and I am only responsible for it, please grant me ten days leave”

Sample 8:

Another employee applied for half day leave as follows:

“Since I have to go to the cremation ground at 10 o’ clock and I may not return, please grant me half day casual leave”.

Sample 9:

An incident of a leave letter:

“I am suffering from fever, please declare one day holiday”.

Sample 10:

A leave letter to the Headmaster:

“As I am studying in this school I am suffering from headache, I request you to leave me today”.

Sample 11:

Another leave letter to the Headmaster:

“As my headache is paining, please grant me leave for the day”.

Sample 12:

Leave Application:

“My wife is suffering from sickness and as I am her only husband at home I may be granted leave.”

Sample 13:

Letter Writing:

“I am in well here and hope you are also in the same well”.

Sample 14:

A Candidate’s Job Application:

This has reference to your advertisement calling for a Typist and an ‘Announcement – Male or Female’As I am both (!!) for the past several years and I can handle both with good experience, I am applying for the post.

Sample 15:

See the covering note:

“I am enclosed herewith...”

Another note:

“Dear sir: with reference to the above, please refer to my below...”

The peculiarities of Baboo English lie not in the grammar, but in the style. It may be argued that English men and women make equally ridiculous mistakes when using Hindi or other Oriental languages. This only applies to those who have picked up scrap of vernacular from native servants and who do not profess to understand the idiom or grammar of the language. On the other hand, several of the accompanying productions have emanated from men who have passed the university examination in which English is a compulsory subject, and who therefore should be able to write and speak it correctly.

In most of the offices, the clerks deliberately copy a draft of a native English clerk in which he has carelessly omitted or misspelled certain important words. Occasionally, there are some amusing exceptions of such mistakes. In railway work a tool called 'Jim-crow' is used for bending rails. An inspector, who wanted one of these implements, telegraphed to the engineer, but the telegraph clerk took upon himself to alter, what he thought was a nickname and ordered 'James crow' to be sent! A government official once telegraphed for "6 bamboos male, 6 feet long, and 3 inches thick", but the telegraph clerk misread one of the words and substituted 'Baboos' for 'Bamboos', without noticing the absurdity of message, and the addressee was rather astonished at receiving an order for "6 Baboos, male, 6 feet long and 3 inches thick"! Thus, amusing mistakes are committed occasionally.

These clerks use limited number of cliches (such as "do the needful in the matter", "better imagined than described") in an absurd manner in which long and sometimes obsolete words are used in place of those of ordinary and everyday use. Beside clerks, Baboo English is also used by schoolteachers of rural origin and other Class III and Class IV employees of government concerns.

Baboo English and Butler English, born about 200 years ago in slavery, are reduced and simplified varieties of English language as compared to Standard English. The Indian Baboos actually try to express their Hindi sentiments in a more prestigious language. Butler English functions as link language in domestic situations and has as its companions other varieties of English such as Chinese Pidgin English (spoken by Chinese servants and British employers) and Tay Boy (the pidgin French of Vietnam).

Both Butler and Baboo English have been dismissed as sub-standard varieties of English. The remaining varieties of English language, such as Pidgin English, Boxwallah English, Cheechee English have been considered as hotchpotch varieties of English as they are always measured against the contemporary version of the native English model. These varieties of English may not be able to hold out for long in their interminable battle against the standard Indian English.

Thus various types of English is spoken in this world's oldest, largest and the most tenacious plural society regionally varied with specific social formations, cultural patterns and value structure. And it is this English language (although in its various forms) which contributed a lot in the national movement for the liberation, in providing an all India platform for articulating the value inherent in composite culture together with the promotion of science, technology and the rationalistic temper.

By the end of the nineteenth century with the establishment of five universities at Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Allahabad, and Lahore the obvious encouragement of English was observed. English became a 'prestige' language in comparison to the Indian languages. English since then has come to acquire a central position in the Indian social hierarchy, serving a variety of purpose in a variety of situations, for a variety of people.

English has acquired the largest vocabulary of all the world's languages. Half of the world's books are written in English and majority of the international telephone calls are made in English. Maximum number of mail is written and addressed in English and eighty per cent of all computer text is stored in English. English will continue to be used in India for years to come.

English with the influence of number of Indian language for a very long time has acquired a local Indian colour. The coexistence of Indian languages and English has subsequently resulted in the Indianization of English and Anglicization of Indian languages. Consequently, one finds a new variety of Hindi/Tamil/Telugu/Marathi and so on, and correspondingly the new varieties of English such as Hindi English, Tamil English, Telugu English, Marathi English, etc. A majority of the English using society is bilingual or multilingual where process like borrowing, code switching and language switching from English into Indian languages are quite common. These processes form the code repertoire of the bilingual users of English. It is used in cross-cultural and cross religious context. Indians are bilingual in the sense that they are using English as a complementary language in typically Indian context. As a medium for interstate communication, English has been used as a lingua franca both before and since India's independence. Code switching has a major contribution in the formation of Indian English. In the development of distinct Indian English three grids mainly, the cultural, the linguistic and the pragmatic, primarily determined their deviation from the native varieties of English (Kachru, 1986; 109).

In cultural anthropology we find that our language determines the way we order our universe. This does not mean that people speak the same language differently perceive things differently but rather they tend to arrange the things they perceive in different ways according to the type of language they speak. This is something that varies from one culture to another.

We have surpassed all other languages of the world and accepted the English language as an international language but we speak it in our own way. We never mind to switch over to Hindi in the emotional situation or in a family domain. In order to bring uniformity a Standard English should be promoted. There have been rigorous attempts by all educational institutions to promote the teaching and learning of English throughout the country. The efforts should be made at primary level otherwise the language will not come out from the grip of culture and society and India will continue to speak different varieties of English.

The provocative study of relationship of language, culture and society in the Indian context, however, deserves further investigation. No other country affords so much opportunity for this kind of study as India. There is a great scope for in-depth studies on languages—Particularly Indian languages and their influence over English language—from a sociolinguistic orientation. It will answer the interesting questions with regard to the underlying bilingual competence and educational efficiency. The status and culture of the society would be of considerable importance in making predictions about the future status of languages they speak.

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