



## *Sprachbund* features in Indian English Writings of the Nineteenth Century: A Few Examples

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**Abstract:** Indian English has undergone the influence of diverse Indian languages so that some sociolinguists have doubted its existence. But Indian English has bound itself into one whole by virtue of carrying in its corpus the *sprachbund* features of Indian languages. This phenomenon can be located in the nineteenth century itself and this paper discusses a few examples of the *sprachbund* features in Indian writing in English in the nineteenth century. The paper aims to show that Indian English was destined to consolidate into one dialect since the days of its inception in Indian society.

**Keywords:** Indian English *sprachbund*, 'areal', mother-tongue interference.

Indian English is one of the recognized dialects of the English language today <sup>1</sup>. Still writers and critics argued that like Indian nationalism, Indian English is also fractured <sup>2</sup> into regional entities like Hinglish, Bengali English, Tamil English, Punjabi English etc. Sociolinguists like Kamal K. Sridhar pointed out an integrating feature in Indian English:

While transfer of structural features from the mother tongue adds to the diversity of non-native varieties in multilingual communities, it also has a unifying effect when the mother-tongue in question share typological or *sprachbund* (areal) features. This is true of South Asia, where due to millennia of language contact, most of the languages of the area have come to share a number of formal properties such as retroflex stops, the dative subject construction, sentential and participle relative clauses, etc. The English spoken in this area is influenced by these areal features, contributing to the structural cohesiveness of South Asian English (43).

Braj B. Kachru also noted this aspect among the languages used in India:

It is not only that the language families are shared across the continent; there is also considerable linguistic convergence (*Sprachbund*) due to areal proximity and contact between typologically distinct languages, such as Dravidian and Indo-Aryan. This convergence is additionally the result of shared cultural and political history, shared literary and folk traditions, and all-pervasive sub-strata of Sanskrit, Persian and English, in that chronological order ('English' 498).

Jyoti Sanyal enlisted the following expressions having the same meaning from several Indian languages: 'chhoti chhoti baatein (Hindi), chhoto chhoto katha (Bengali), kochchu kochchu karyangal (Malayalam), choty choty goshti (Marathi) (310-11).

These are examples of reduplication, which is one of the *sprachbund* features of the languages of India. When Padma in the second chapter of *Midnight's Children* says, 'Eat, na, food is spoiling' (24), Rushdie basically uses a *sprachbund* or 'areal' feature – the word 'na' - which is present in many Indian languages such as Hindi, Urdu and Bangla as a peculiar suffix to a sentence. However, it needs to be mentioned here that the phrase 'food is spoiling' is an example of the mesolectal<sup>3</sup> variety of Indian English which is indicative of the class to which Padma belongs and not an 'areal' feature. It is often assumed that in Indian writing in English, examples of linguistic convergence can be found only in the twentieth century especially since writers like R.K.Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand started their literary career in the 1930s and later popularized by Rushdie. For example, in his book *Indianization of the English Language*, Braj B. Kachru cited the phenomenon of 'Indianization' mostly from Indian English novels of the twentieth century and ignored much of the writings of the previous century with the assumption that 'Before 1947 English had a precarious position in South Asia' (17). In order to clarify his stand, Kachru mentioned of 'Babu English', a mesolectal variety which emerged in the nineteenth century, but ignored the rich acrolectal variety, which did participate in the phenomenon of 'Indianization' of the English language. Shifting *sprachbund* features of the Indian languages to English writings and speeches consists of a vital part of 'Indianization' of the English language. This paper discusses a few samples of *sprachbund* or 'areal' features from the writings and speeches of Indians in the nineteenth century, which paved the path for more such uses in the twentieth century.

An interesting aspect of the use of *sprachbund* features in Indian English is that in most of the cases, the user spontaneously uses a translation of an idiomatic expression or a manner of expression peculiar to her/his mother tongue, yet that particular piece of mother-tongue interference remains comprehensible to even those Indian readers or listeners whose mother tongue is something other than that of the user. For example, when Rammohan Roy allowed interference of mother tongue while translating one of his own articles written in Bangla into English, he did not render himself incomprehensible to non-Bengali English-educated Indians: '...what misery do the women not suffer?' Roy's rhetorical question implies that Indian women suffer all sorts of misery possible on earth. The sentence is taken from 'A Second Conference Between an Advocate for, and an Opponent of, the Practice of Burning Widows Alive' (1820). While translating from Bangla it was quite natural on the part of Rammohan to indulge in mother-tongue interference; the sentence carried his sincere feelings quite forcefully. Now, in several Indian languages such as Hindi and Urdu this type of expression is also common.

A wide domain of common vocabulary is also one of the 'areal' features which bind Indian English into one whole. In his diary-entries which was published in 1871, Keshub Chunder Sen used words such as 'dhoom-dham' (3), 'bilaiti' (25) and 'tamasha'. These loan-words are quite common in almost all Indian languages and they constitute a characteristic of *sprachbund* languages. 'Dhoom-dham' is an Indian word for 'extravaganza' and in Indian English it conveys an idea of extravaganza which is peculiar to Indian life and culture. Keshub Sen provided the meaning of 'bilaiti' in a one-word footnote: 'foreign'. But the fact that he preferred the Indian

word over the English 'foreign' suggests that he felt the urge to express the indigenous meaning captured in the Indian word 'bilaiti':

It is the first European city [Marseilles] we pass through; I cannot help being struck with astonishment, everything is so unique, so perfectly beautiful, so perfectly *bilaiti* (25).

The word 'bilaiti' captures here a typical Indian attitude towards the west: it is a curious mixture of awe and cynicism. The word 'tamasha' comes close to 'farcical' and it is very popular in many Indian languages. Keshub Chunder Sen, who seldom used Indian words or phrases in his lectures, used the word 'tamasha' in one of his diary entries to capture a unique spirit of fun and banter: 'While enjoying the grand *tamasha* we almost forget that we are on board a ship!' (10-11).

'Areal' features are often deeply interspersed with the common cultural space shared by speakers of the *sprachbund* languages. In Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife*, Matangini, the young heroine, is addressed as 'mother' (71) by an elderly woman. Throughout India, a girl or a lady is addressed as 'mother' as a mark of respect and affection. Hence, when Suki's mother, a minor character in the novel, says, 'No mother, do not return but go to your sister and see what he will do' (71), an Indian reader comprehends the particular tone of affection and respect inherent in the sentence. Similarly in Krupabai Sathianadhan's *Saguna*, there is a reference to the vow of 'sakhi' which is peculiar in Indian rural life and culture. In the novel, Lakshmi exhorts her friend to promise and take the vow of 'sakhi':

'Here before Gunga mata, before Surya Narayena I say that you are my own sakhi, my friend, till the end of my life. Now do not fear. Your brother will be my brother when you are gone and your father mine,' and she drew little Gopala to her breast and the three wept (*Saguna* 39).

The vow is further sanctified by invoking the river Ganges ('Gunga mata) and the sun ('Surya Narayena), both of which are worshipped by the Hindu community throughout India. Sathianadhan thus authored in the above passage a pan-Indian cultural discourse in English although her primary aim had been to portray the relationship of two Marathi girls realistically.

Finally, I am going to discuss *sprachbund* features in one of the speeches of Swami Vivekananda which was delivered in the last decade of the nineteenth century in 1897. After his first historic tour of the West, the first lecture delivered in Asia was in Colombo in Sri Lanka from where began a historic journey of Swami Vivekananda delivering a series of lectures in the Indian sub-continent including present-day India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. It was in 1897, when in Colombo Vivekananda defined 'India'; in this speech he used some Sanskrit words which could be understood by most south-Asians:

If there is any land on this earth that can lay claim to be the blessed *Punya Bhumi*, to be the land to which souls on this earth must come to account for Karma, the land to which every soul that is wending its way Godward must come to attain its last home, the land where humanity has attained its highest towards gentleness, towards generosity, towards purity, towards calmness, above all, the land of introspection and and of spirituality – it is India. (*Lectures* 3).

Phrases such as ‘Punya Bhumi’ are not to be found in his speeches of Chicago. In Colombo Vivekananda was speaking to Asians where he could use ‘areal’ features of the south-Asian languages. Speakers of south-Asian languages are quite aware of ‘Punya’, ‘Bhumi’ and ‘Karma’. Moreover, instead of saying ‘that can claim’, the clause ‘that can lay claim’ point towards a linguistic convergence as in several Indian languages a claim may be lain or imparted. Again, there is an influence of Indian religious and cultural belief in the clause ‘must come to account for Karma’. ‘Karma’ here does not denote merely each and every activity a man or a woman does but moral action which has an impact on the balance of good deeds and bad deeds. Visiting a holy place or a pilgrimage is considered in India as an action which can ‘account for’ the sins committed in a lifetime. Hence, the passage of Vivekananda, in a nutshell, contains all the three *sprachbund* features discussed in this article: a particular manner of saying, a common vocabulary and a common cultural context of using an Indian word or describing a native custom.

It may be concluded here that Indian English, since the days of its inception, was destined to integrate itself rather than split itself into regional fragmented identities. The English language played an interesting role in integrating speakers of diverse Indian languages through the *sprachbund* or ‘areal’ features which had been inherent in those languages. It is a fascinating history of the English language in India and perhaps it could have been possible only in India, the land which has a long tradition of embracing diverse languages, cultures and religions, which is unique in world history.

#### NOTES

1. While David Crystal observed that there was more speakers of Indian English than British English, R.M.W. Dixon recognized the existence of Indian English and Braj B. Kachru wrote extensively on Indian English.
2. See Krishnaswamy and Burde’s *The Politics of Indians’ English* p. 60-63.
3. According to Barbara A. Fennell, ‘It is usually the case that a society in which a creole develops displays a continuum of language varieties, which we refer to as a post-creole continuum. The varieties that coexist in such circumstances range from a still relatively reduced ‘basilectal’ variety, through a range of more standard-like ‘mesolectal’ varieties to ‘acrolectal’ varieties, which are very close to the dominant (lexifier) language, but which retain features of grammar, lexicon and pronunciation that still mark them off from the national (often European) standard variety (Fennell 4). The terms ‘acrolect’, ‘mesolect’ and ‘basilect’ are now used in contexts beyond that of post-creole continuum, in indigenized variants of a language. For example, Kamal K, Sridhar categorizes the English used by clerks and receptionists in India as ‘mesolect’ and the English used by journalists and professors as ‘acrolect’ (42-43). Hence the texts that I discuss in this article may be called ‘acrolect’.

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