

(C)LOSING THE DEBATE: IMPORTANCE OF EFFECTIVENESS IN COMMUNICATION

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*Friends,
our dear sister
is departing for foreign
in two three days,
and
we are meeting today
to wish her bon voyage.*

*You are all knowing, friends,
What sweetness is in Miss Pushpa.
I don't mean only external sweetness
but internal sweetness.
Miss Pushpa is smiling and smiling
even for no reason but simply because
she is feeling.*

(‘Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.’ – Ezekiel, 1989)

Abstract

In a world that is getting increasingly multicultural, bilingualism is not an option. So too effectiveness in communication is a necessity, not an option. English being the second language, for most in India, there is an innate tendency to translate from the mother tongue, creating faux pas that can be disastrous. However, if one is aware of these pitfalls their effect can be reduced, if not totally averted. My paper points out such errors in grammar, vocabulary, accent, spellings and punctuation, in the Indian context, so that they can serve as guideposts to teachers and students in diverse locations.

Keywords: effectiveness, bilingualism, English, pitfalls, Indian context

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1. Introduction

Indian English has over the years not merely become a genre in itself; it has also been exploited by both native and diasporic writers of Indian origin, with great effectiveness. Yet, there is no denying that while the humour and quirkiness it adds to Indian literature in English, helping it create a niche in the extant body of literatures in English, in its day to day use, is charming in its own way, this amusement can often turn to chagrin or disappointment with the faux pas that creep into the manner in which English is used by Indians.

Without really going into the debate whether language is essentially a vehicle for communication and so its perfection should not be insisted upon, I would like to base my paper on the premise that this argument really does not hold water, if one acknowledges the fact that there is really a very thin line between communication and miscommunication; and miscommunication, when it does take place can have effects that can prove disastrous. A case in point is that of an employee of a multinational company, who put forward a leave request stating “Kindly grant me leave, as I want to marry my daughter”. Its humour apart, such statements can prove to be fairly controversial and detrimental to the image and wellbeing of the persons involved.

2. Common communication mistakes

As a teacher of English Literature and Communication, I have come across varied instances in my almost two and a half decades of experience, where one has to get in touch with colleagues or students to ask them what they are trying to convey. Moreover, in my attempts to enhance the communication skills of students, I have also realised that identifying pitfalls in communication, that are bound to be common to a group of speakers, given that in India English is the second language for most and hence the native language interferes in its acquisition and use, helps them to reduce these errors or even steer clear of them. This paper would thus look at errors in language use, by highlighting the common mistakes committed in five areas – vocabulary, accent/pronunciation, spellings, punctuation and grammar. While some of these may be peculiar ‘Indianisms’, others may be applicable to non-native speakers in general; and, if not, this paper would at least open up a thought process through which teachers and users of English could think along the lines of identifying such peculiarities, in order to avoid them.

2.1 Accent/ Pronunciation

Given that the phonetic structure of every language is different, often pronunciation as well as the rhythm of speech can be carried forward from one language to the other. Most Indian languages, for example, encompass a subtle rise at the end of a sentence, to indicate a question or have the 'wh' word, which marks the question, appearing at the end of a sentence. As a result, Indians often use statements as questions by raising the intonation towards the end of the sentence. For example, they say 'You are coming?' instead of 'Are you coming?', in case they want to ask a question. So too, accent or stress gets placed on the wrong word, making it at times difficult to understand the meaning - in the sentence 'What are you doing?' often instead of stressing on 'what' people stress on 'are'.

Moreover, even in words, the stress is laid on the wrong syllable, especially in words that have shifting stress like 'photograph' and 'photography'. These are often pronounced as /'fəʊtəʊgrɑ:f/ and /fəʊ'təʊgrəfi/, while words like 'memory' are often pronounced as 'mammary', 'paverty' replaces 'poverty' and 'vote' 'what'. So too, given that native Indian languages do not have silent letters, words like 'ghost', 'honest', 'honour' are either mispronounced or then misspelt, with pronunciation getting further complicated by English having liberally borrowed from other languages which makes pronunciation of words like 'rendezvous' (/reɪndeɪzveɪz/) and 'suite' (/swi:t/ gets pronounced as /su:t/) difficult to pronounce.

Ironically, this situation has worsened due to a dual onslaught that of poor reading habits along with spellings being taught through phonetics in schools, in accordance with the latest trends.

2.2 Spellings

What is not however realised though is that this principle of learning spellings, through phonetics, is a modern technique that has been developed essentially in a context, where English is the mother and not the other tongue, as a result of which the question of native language interference does not arise. Since this pedagogical principle has been blindly adopted in India, there is often a problem with people's ability to spell, more especially in similar sounding words like 'stationery' and 'stationary' as also 'letter', 'later' and 'latter'. In fact, while the three words in the latter set do not even have the same pronunciation, often as a result of poor pronunciation, they are badly spelt. The problem becomes only worse with words where spellings change as per word forms, for e.g. 'practice' as a noun and a verb. Simple words like 'writing' and 'grammar' are also victims of a similar issue.

Furthermore, words which exist separately, but get joined to form another word like 'in to' and 'in spite of' regularly serve as the nemesis of people, while writing. A case in point is a notice that was at one point, put up in railway compartments, 'During travelling, Do not throw cigarette butts, tobacco and pan masala pouches

in to the gap' (John, 2007: 51) where instead of 'into' being one word, it was used as two separate words.

2.3 Punctuation

In fact, this example also serves to illustrate the errors that creep in, in the use of punctuation. This railway sign has a capital 'D' for 'do not' after a comma and while this may be an exception, regular mistakes occur in the use of exclamation marks, semicolons and apostrophes. Whereas people have a doubt whether to use capital letters after an exclamation mark if it used at the beginning of a sentence or whether the exclamation mark should immediately follow the exclamatory word like in the sentence 'Alas, I could not save him!'; the problem is much worse in the case of apostrophes and semicolons where people either don't use them at all or put them in the wrong place. It is not uncommon to find 'Punjabi Dishe's' or 'Your's' or even 'CD's' where people insert an apostrophe, where it is not necessary. People are also confused and use apostrophes in words like 'its', even when they are not referring to 'it is'. For e.g. 'A dog wags its tail when it's happy' where 'its tail' does not require an apostrophe but 'it's happy' does. The reason for this, according to a scholar of Marathi, from Mumbai, Ms. Anagha Mandavkar, is that Sanskrit and Marathi, among other languages, did not have the punctuation marks that English does, in ancient times. These languages relied on a single vertical dash for a short pause and a double vertical dash for a long pause. However, in modern times, in Indian languages, these punctuation marks have been borrowed from English and are thus not a part of the linguistic subconscious of its people.

Paradoxically, even teachers and scholars of English ignore the use of punctuation, as they find it incidental and not particularly important, without really realising that even a comma can completely change the meaning of a sentence. As Lynne Truss (2003) opines in *Eats Shoots and Leaves*, where she gives the example of the sentence 'A woman without her man is nothing'. The first comma remaining constant after 'a woman', a shift in the second comma from after her, to after man, can completely invert the meaning of the sentence.

2.4 Vocabulary

And, if a thing as easily dismissed as punctuation can create such havoc, one can only imagine the problems that can creep in due to inappropriate use of vocabulary. A common mistake is the use of 'myself so and so', as a form of introduction, in India. While this is a case of literal translation from the native tongue, other peculiar usages can include random coining of new words like 'shady' or 'poky' for a place which has shade and for getting poked. Furthermore, people also change words from one form of speech to another, merely to suit their needs, without

bothering to verify whether such a word actually exists – for example, ‘don’t get panicky’ instead of don’t panic. Words and phrases are also often coined to describe things, which are essentially Indian and for which an English word may not exist, as a result. Imagine my shock, when a colleague, while I was in Germany, took me to an Indian restaurant, which served puffed pancakes, referring to the Indian puri or the sign boards on stores, which regularly state ‘Fall and beeding done here’ for a particular form of stitching done for Indian garments that include sarees and dupattas.

These Indianisms often get extended to the creation of plurals like fishes and hairs, for words where the collective noun defines the plural, rather than a change in the root word – for example a school of fish or a strand of hair; as also repeating a word for emphasis – for example, ‘He did it despite me telling him again and again not to do so’, instead of saying ‘He did it, despite my repeatedly telling him not to do so’.

In India plurals are also ironically used to indicate respect, as most native languages have separate pronouns to indicate respect accorded to position or age. Thus while in Hindi (the national language of India), for ‘you’ there are three words ‘tu’, ‘tum’ and ‘aap’, used on the basis of the formality one desires to bring into the address, in English ‘you’ is ubiquitously used, despite the other person’s position or age; as a result, quite often, Indians use ‘they’ for a senior person, despite s/he being the only person being referred to. The desire to show respect also manifests in other forms, like the use of outdated and outmoded constructions like ‘Respected Sir’ and ‘Your most humble servant’, which are remnants from the British era and in the modern context smack of a kowtowing attitude.

Another legacy from the British era, though not brought in by them, is the extension of words from a specific context, to a totally unrelated one. Cases in point are the First Class and Third Class compartments of the railways, introduced by the British, which have become generic metaphors for anything that is excellent or mediocre. A very tasty dish is therefore referred to as having ‘first class taste’ while a cooking disaster would be referred to as ‘third class food’.

In fact, the faux pas in language use get further heightened, due to the subtleties in vocabulary that are often lost on an unsuspecting user, for whom there is little or no difference between ‘back’ and ‘ago’ or ‘atmosphere’ ‘climate’ and ‘weather’, as a result of which it is not uncommon to hear - ‘the class started 15 minutes back’ instead of ‘ago’ and that the ‘atmosphere has changed’, when the person is actually referring to the ‘weather’.

On the other hand are instances, where people, in an attempt to lay emphasis or as a result of their ignorance engage in redundant usages like ‘revert back’, ‘repeat

again' and 'fully empty', which while sounding funny can also make the listener/reader, whose attention is arrested by it, lose the train of thought. Another ambiguous usage is that of 'this and that' instead of 'many things', as in 'I bought this and that', which happens since people, when they are at a loss for words, randomly replace the words they are seeking with either what comes to their mind or with pronouns, which are easy to remember.

Real disaster however occurs in inadvertent faux pas created through the use of words like 'backside' instead of from the rear entrance, as the title of the book *Entry From Backside Only* aptly indicates, the humour of which is driven home by the description on the back flap "Backsides have a frontal position in Indian-English. In cluttered, crowded alleys there can be seen the notice "Entry from Backside", a usage not exactly meant as a come-hither line to gays" or this statement 'I'm fine at my end. Hoping your end is fine too'.

Translations or Indianisms also appear in less humorous forms, revealing the need for voicing concepts that do not appear in English. Culturally, relationships hold great value for Indians, as a result there are separate words defining each relation and generic terms that exist in English do not seem to satisfy the Indian palate. They thus overcome this issue by referring to a 'real sister', 'rakhi brother', 'third cousin', 'own daughter' or 'maternal cousin'.

2.5 Grammar

Vocabulary apart, the real nemesis for most is grammar, affording the unsuspecting user a wide range of bottomless pits, from which s/he can emerge, if at all, only with the greatest effort. A common one among this is the use of the present continuous, by Indian users of English, to denote the future. It is not uncommon to hear, 'I am going to go to his house in the evening' instead of 'I will go to his house in the evening'. This being a literal translation, it gains a greater degree of complexity, because of the absence of the notion of modal auxiliaries, in many of the native Indian languages. A similar problem also occurs in the use of the perfect tense, with its variations like 'has eaten', 'had eaten', 'might have eaten' etc.

Apart from these couple of problems that arise due to differences in approach to tenses, another major problem is that of the use of dual time markers. Drawing upon native phrases like 'aaj shaam' or 'aaj sandhyakali', people regularly use 'today evening' instead of 'this evening'.

Moreover, while English makes steady use of determiners/articles, whether 'a', 'an', 'the' or 'this', 'that' etc., in native Indian languages, determiners are totally absent. If at all, there are demonstrative pronouns, which even English has. As a result,

non-native users of English from India, often tend to either drop out determiners totally or use them, where they are not required.

Moreover, given that 'a' and 'an' and 'the' /ðə/ and 'the' /ði/ are selected on the basis of the pronunciation of the word that follows, i.e. they are based on phonetics and not spellings, non-native users often get confused and write 'an university' instead of 'a university'.

A similar case in point is that of phrasal verbs – a concept that is not applicable to most native Indian languages, where there are no doubt phrases but not phrasal verbs. Indians thus get confused while using 'look into', 'look at', 'look through', 'look in on' etc., awkwardly stating 'He was constantly looking into me'.

Another common error that one comes across is the absence of subject-verb concord, due to the rules of sentence formation that are vastly different across languages. Whereas, in Indian languages, the most common construction is (SOP) Subject, Object and Predicator, in English it is (SPO) Subject, Predicator and Object. For example, while in Gujarati one would say 'Hu tane maris' (literally translated as I you hit), in English one would say I will hit you. Given this, non native Indian users of English often drop both the modal auxiliary and lose out on the subject verb concord, as the concept of pre and post modifiers defining the choice of the verb form does not occur to them. Consequently, it is not uncommon to come across the usage 'The basket of flowers are on the table' instead of 'The basket of flowers is on the table', as people often use the verb based on the word preceding it and not the head word in the Noun Phrase.

The tendency is also to randomly drop the 's' from the 'verb' or even 'adverb', as people often confuse it with the plural form and do not see it as reflective of the form in case of the verb and an integral part of the word in case of an adverb. While it is not so uncommon to come across the use of 'I will meet you afterward' instead of 'I will meet you afterwards', I had a teacher, who always dropped the 's' from verbs, when it was required and added it where it wasn't. She would thus often tell us 'If you wants to sits sits, if you don't wants to sits leave, but don't makes noise.'

An equally fascinating yet incorrect use is that of the double comparative or even a pre-modified superlative for emphasis, as in 'He is my most best friend' or 'He is much more happier alone' or the random use of plural to drive home a point, most commonly seen in the application letter, where the candidate wants to suitably impress the prospective employer; one can hardly therefore fault such a person, when s/he says 'I will serve the organisation to the best of my abilities'.

3. Conclusion

I am sure that those, who believe that language is essentially a means of communication and sticklers for perfection are veritable bores, who need to be dealt with rather firmly, would say that all these arguments are ‘much ado about nothing’. And yet, one can almost hear Prof. Higgins from *My Fair Lady*, ranting about ‘the cold-blooded murder of the English tongue’ and Wodehouse turning in his grave, sensing that people, who are naïve to the subtleties of British sarcasm would be content and deem themselves forgiven by a person, who in response to their repetition of the same mistake and repeated apology thereafter would turn around and say ‘Yes, I am sure you won’t do it again.’

I only hope that his ghost does not emerge and confront such a person only to be told ‘anything only you are saying man’, for then the English would be history.

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