

English in Indian Multilingual Setting

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The 2001-02 census of India has reported 2.3 million people reporting English as their primary language and a number of 86 million have reported English as a second language. The role of English in education and employment domain is well known all over. In addition English has made inroads in different social domains like

family, friendship, transaction, government and the like. Apparently English looks more native than any other tribal language spoken in India. These linguistic conflicts do occur in a multilingual society; thus giving rise to yet another branch of study: Political Linguistics, in the domain of multilingual

societies all over the globe. The Three Language Formula introduced in Indian Education, as a reform to overcome some prominent linguistic problems in language education, is a compromise between the demands of various pressure groups and has been hailed as a masterly - if imperfect - solution to a complicated problem. We require revisiting our language education system, to look for its areas of difficulties in different Indian speech communities? During 1970-80's at least one third of Indian schools had English as their first language. Quick fixes don't normally work for education systems. It needs a well researched and defined policy with the margins to accommodate at least the major languages spoken in India. The language has already been well established in the country and has acquired its own independent identity. With a number of foreign investors flocking to India and the growth of outsourcing, English has come to play a key role in professional relationships between foreign and Indian companies. Familiarity with the differences between American and British English has definitely grown, as much business communication is carried out according to the language style with which a client is comfortable.

Key words: Multilingual; primary language; second language; census of India; educational policy; political linguistics; social domains.

There are reportedly five thousand languages spoken all over the world, and out of these, eight hundred fifty languages are spoken in India. If one has to believe the figures available with the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, then the figure crosses a thousand languages spoken across the country. Whatever the facts, the multilingual setting of India is quite obvious, wherein people normally speak more than two languages. In such a linguistic setting, there is naturally one or two or even three languages

playing the vital role of lingua franca (a link language).

We have Hindi covering a large portion of the population, as a lingua franca, but considering the ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic diversity of our country, Hindi does not serve this purpose everywhere. Under these circumstances, another major language would naturally be used for this purpose. But Indian the linguistic scenario takes a different course here: English, a minority, but an important language, serves the purpose. In fact English serves as a second language in India as well a link language of pan Indian elite.

The Census of India 2000-2001 records a very microscopic minority of 2.3 lakhs who speak English as the primary language. But 86 million have recorded English as their second language and 39 million as their third language. This brings the figure of English speakers to 125 million which is far larger than the number of English speakers in UK.

Unfortunately, the census asked people to list a maximum of three languages, so it is not known how many speak more than three. As expected, urban Indians are more likely to be multilingual but as many as 136.7 million rural Indians speak at least two languages. The data covers only those over five because the census assumed that younger children would only know their mother tongue.

The Indian linguistic scenarios have allowed English into various domains like: Family/Friend, Transactions, Education, Government; and especially in Employment domains English has made a mark. One can even think of considering English ashore native than any tribal language spoken in the far flung pockets of India, where the language is spoken as native. Such a linguistic scenario sometimes results in a threat to a living language. It might even come

up as a national issue. These linguistic conflicts do occur in a multilingual society; thus giving rise to yet another branch of study: Political Linguistics, in the domain of multilingual societies all over the globe. Although Sociolinguistics has been raising these issues, concerning Language politics, there is still huge scope for the subject. It is necessary to note here that the eighth schedule of the Indian constitution recognizes eighteen languages as official and gives these languages protection and promotion. In many cases the State boundaries have been drawn on linguistic lines. The acknowledged languages are: Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu. India is divided linguistically into two major language families, the Indo-Aryan and the Dravidian languages (Indian Culture, 1998) (appendices 1 and 2). It is important to bear in mind that European history has witnessed terrible linguistic disasters such as even putting a language under a ban in its own native land. And when we talk of English in India as a second language, it is easy to understand its force in the domains of Education and employment in particular, thus providing scope to yet one more possible branch: Economic Linguistics.

The language has already been well established in the country and has acquired its own independent identity. With a number of foreign investors flocking to India and the growth of outsourcing, English has come to play a key role in professional relationships between foreign and Indian companies. Familiarity with the differences between American and British English has definitely grown, as much business communication is carried out according to the language style with which a client is comfortable.

English serves two purposes. First, it provides a

linguistic tool for the administrative cohesiveness of a country, and, secondly, it serves as a language of wider communication. (Kachru 1986a: 8). English functions in the Indian socio-cultural context to perform roles relevant and appropriate to the social, educational and administrative network of India (Kachru 1986a: 111).

English is used in both public and personal domains and its functions “extend far beyond those normally associated with an outside language, including the instrumental, the regulative, the interpersonal and the innovative, self-expressive function” (Kachru 1986a: 37). As pointed out before, the role of English is not replaced: it overlaps with local languages in certain domains (Kandiah citing Sridhar, 1985; Shridhar and Shridhar, 1986; 1991: 273).

The Three Language Formula introduced in Indian Education, as a reform to overcome some prominent linguistic problems in language education, is a compromise between the demands of various pressure groups and has been hailed as a masterly - imperfect - solution to a complicated problem. It seeks to accommodate the interests of group identity (mother tongues and regional languages), national pride and unity (Hindi), and administrative efficiency and technological progress (English). (Baldrige 1996: 12).

There is an ongoing fear that Indian languages will be ignored as English gains popularity in India. One should be cautious about this, since Mark Tully claims (Tully 1997: 160) one can obtain a deeper knowledge of the culture only through the knowledge of the language (or one of the languages) of that culture. He quotes Robert Phillipson and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (1996), according to whom the consequence of the current language policy is that many among the younger generations of Indians are being

deprived of familiarity with their cultural heritage, and quite probably of an education that would enable them to contribute to the solution of Indian problems in the future.

According to a recent study by the Department of Human Resource Development, sixty percent of our population will be at working age by 2020, whereas those of China, Japan, the USA and EU will be around forty percent. So, the Indian government is emphasizing giving technical as well as English training to the next generation. Unfortunately, despite repeated recommendations by different education commissions constituted by the Government of India, the position of English in the curriculums and methods of teaching have always been in a state of flux. For example, in 1984, the West Bengal government completely removed the teaching and learning of English from the primary school curriculum; but from 1999 onwards, it had to reintroduce it as the second language from class II.

The big question facing us today is how we can take English to the masses. How do we equip the large potential workforce of our country to rise up to the challenge and opportunity that the millennium presents us with!

Don't we require revisiting our language education system, to look for its areas of difficulties in different Indian speech communities? During 1970-80's at least one third of Indian schools had English as their first language. The figure might have crossed this mark in past two decades. Some schools would overplay English to the extent of charging the students with fines, as punishment for using any language other than English.

Quick fixes don't normally work for education systems. It needs a well researched and defined policy with the margins to accommodate at least the major languages spoken in India. English

education in general remains poor, the reason being that not much modernization has taken place, yet the result is a mushroom growth of English Teaching Institutes everywhere in big and smaller towns of India, with their never fulfilling of guarantees of *4 din mien angrezi bolna siikhye...* and so on. Even some substandard, so called foreign Institutes display a dismal picture. We have noticed different English styles emerging from different speech communities; although the cover term of Indian English is in use, we can still find: hinglish/binglish/pinglish/ginglish/tinglish and Kinglish like varieties, quite visible at least in the spoken forms. We have many linguistic jokes emerging from this situation. If we really need to take English to the masses, we certainly need to conform to a standard variety of the language, so that at least the regional disparity can be reduced.

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