

Mother-tongue India

David Crystal

Talk for Lingua Franca (ABC, Australia), January 2005

India currently has a special place in the English language record books - as the country with the largest English-speaking population in the world. Ten years ago that record was held by the United States. Not any more.

The population of India passed a billion - that's a thousand million - a couple of years ago, and is increasing at the rate of 3% per annum. In 1997 an *India Today* survey suggested that about a third of the population had the ability to carry on a conversation in English. This was an amazing increase over the estimates of the 1980s, when only about four or five per cent of the population were thought to use the language. And given the steady increase in English learning since 1997 in schools and among the upwardly mobile, we must today be talking about at least 350 million. That's equal to the combined English-speaking populations of Britain, the USA, Australia and New Zealand.

All of these speakers - bar a lakh or so - have learned English as a second language. A lakh, by the way, is the Indian English word for a hundred thousand - it's spelled l, a, k, h. English has special regional status in India, and is an important unifying linguistic medium between the Indo-European north and the Dravidian south. Special status means much more than having a place in the public institutions of the country - in parliament, the law courts, broadcasting, the press, and the education system. It means that the language permeates daily life. You can't avoid it, especially in the cities.

A couple of months ago, my wife and I returned from a two-week lecturing tour of India, sponsored by the British Council. We visited Chennai (or Madras, as it used to be called), Delhi, Kolkata (or Calcutta), Pune, and Mumbai (or Bombay), and we found ourselves surrounded by English everywhere. The roads into the city centres from the airports would pass through some very poor areas, but even the smallest shops and stalls would have an English sign or poster nearby. Nor were the slums exempt: on the corrugated walls of a straggling Mumbai complex was a series of ads for vitrified tiles, all in English.

Outside the Red Fort in Delhi, a Hindi-speaking teacher was marshalling a class of 30 Hindi-speaking teenagers, and giving them instructions about where to meet and when their bus would leave - all in English. Outside St Thomas' Cathedral in Chennai we met a group of primary-school Tamil children coming out of the local school. As soon as they saw us they waved excitedly - we were the only fair-skinned people to be seen - and we received a chorus of 'hello', 'hi', 'how are you?'.... 'Fine thanks, how are you?' we replied. 'We're fine too', they said. Seven-year-olds, we marvelled, on a confident career-track towards English.

Towards Indian English, of course. India has had a longer exposure to English than any other country which uses it as a second language, and its distinctive words, idioms, grammar, rhetoric and rhythms are numerous and pervasive. By the way, Don't confuse Indian English with what is sometimes called 'Hinglish' - a vague phrase which can refer to a use of English containing occasional Hindi words or to a much more fundamental code-mixing of the two languages, unintelligible to a monolingual English speaker, and heard daily on FM radio. Indian English is a much broader notion, applicable to the whole of India, including those regions where other languages are used. There we find Punglish (mixing with Punjabi), Tamlish (mixing with Tamil), and much more.

Collections of Indian English vocabulary have been around for over a century. A large book known as *Hobson-Jobson* was the first, published in 1886. It is largely of historical interest now, and there have been attempts to supersede it, such as *Hanklin-Janklin* (a book compiled by Nigel Hanklin, and published last year). But no dictionary has yet catalogued the extraordinary stylistic range and regional diversity of Indian English. Just as Australian and New Zealand English have developed in their own directions, so it is with Indian English. We

encountered hundreds of distinctive usages on our travels, such as *pre-owned cars* (meaning 'used cars'). Phone numbers for calling friends and family are called *near and dear numbers*. Something that's free of charge is said to be *free of cost*. A work surface in a kitchen is called a *kitchen platform*. Words are also broken in different ways. In New Delhi the signs warn of an approaching ROUND ABOUT - the two words are separated by a space. Above a store we read SUPER MARKET. A housing ad offers PENT HOUSES. Outside the University in Mumbai is the greeting WEL-COME, with the two elements separated by a hyphen. A roadside warning reads LAND SLIDE PRONE AREA. Another says OVER-SIZE VEHICLES KEEP LEFT. I was continually being surprised by distinctive uses of space or hyphens.

It is far more than just vocabulary, as we saw on the 132-km of road between Pune and Mumbai. Listen to these examples. They're all signs we saw on the roadside. There's nothing quite like them in British English - or in Australian or New Zealand English either.

OVERSPEEDING AND TYRE BURSTING CAUSE ACCIDENTS

DO NOT CRISSCROSS ON EXPRESSWAY - I'd only ever encountered 'crisscross' in informal usage before.

DO NOT LITTER ON YOUR EXPRESSWAY

SPEED BREAKER AHEAD - referring to road bumps

LANDSCAPING AND BEAUTIFICATION

ROAD IN CURVE AHEAD - 'in curve'

PARKING INSIDE THE LAWN IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED - don;t park on the grass.

And then there was this one, which we saw approaching an expressway:

NO 2-/3-WHEELERS. 2-wheelers is- the generic term for motorbikes and scooters; 3-wheelers is the everyday description of auto-rickshaws)

The historical background of India is never far away from everyday usage. 'What do you think you're doing? Cutting grass?' says a boss to a worker lazing about. How can cutting grass be equivalent to doing nothing? Because grass-cutting was done by servants. But this history also promotes correspondences. In particular, there is a remarkable sharing of linguistic humour between India and other parts of the British-influenced English-speaking world. In particular, there's a common delight in word-play. A review headline about a critical book on Jane Austen begins: 'Austensibly, it's about Jane', with the 'o' of 'ostensibly' spelled 'Au'. 'Be Ecofriendly' says a sign in Delhi - but it spells the second word 'Ecofriendelhi'.

Indian English is changing. Regional dialects are increasingly apparent - an inevitable consequence of a result of this huge country's cultural and linguistic diversity. There are noticeable differences of accent and dialect, especially between north and south, and 'regional' jokes are common - you know the sort of thing - 'there was this man from Kerala...', or some other rural region distant from the joke-teller's location. On the ad billboards, and in Bollywood film posters, there are now Hindi slogans written in the roman alphabet. You can see change in the newspapers too - in the matrimonial columns, for instance, where families advertise for desirable brides or grooms. A generation ago these were full of such terms as 'wheatish', describing a type of complexion. Today, these have largely gone, and we find such criteria as 'professionally qualified' instead - a linguistic reflection of an important social change.

Three generations on after independence, Indian English is still having trouble distancing itself from the weight of its British English past. Many people still think of Indian English as inferior, and see British English as the only 'proper' English. It is an impression still fostered by the language examining boards which dominate teachers' mindsets. At the same time, a fresh confidence is plainly emerging among young people, and it is only a matter of time before attitudes change. It's a familiar scenario, for anyone living in Australia and New Zealand.

It could hardly be otherwise when we consider the way Indian writing is increasingly reflecting indigenous varieties. Gone are the days when everyone in a novel, from sahib to servant, spoke standard British English. The same linguistic diversity is apparent in the films - over a thousand each year - produced by Bollywood and the other growing film studios.

There's the less well-known Kollywood in Chennai - beginning with a K, which stands for the suburb of Kodambakkam where the studios are located. And there's Tollywood in Andhra Pradesh - the T stands for Telugu. If I had to choose a single instance of this newfound confidence in films, I would cite the cheekily titled *Bride and Prejudice*.

What status will this rapidly growing English dialect have in the eyes of the rest of the world? Linguistic status is always a reflection of power - political, technological, economic, cultural, religious... - so this is really a question relating to the future of India as a world player. If I were a betting man, I would place quite a large sum on India as an eventual cyber-technological super-power. The amount of daily text-messaging (or SMS) exceeds the amount taking place in the UK, USA, Australia, and New Zealand. The call-centre phenomenon has stimulated a huge expansion of Internet-related activity. When I call up British train enquiries about how to get from Holyhead, where I live, to, say, Manchester, I speak to someone in Hyderabad. The IT press is always speculating about where future Googles will come from. One day I feel sure it will be India.

India has a unique position in the English-speaking world. I see it as a linguistic bridge between the major first-language dialects of the world, such as British and American English, and the major foreign-language varieties, such as those emerging in China and Japan. China is the closest competitor for the English-speaking record. Currently with some 220 million speakers of English, it plans to increase this total dramatically as the Olympics approaches. But China does not have the pervasive English linguistic environment encountered in India; nor does it have the strength of linguistic tradition which provides multiple continuities with the rest of the English-speaking world. When Indian operators answer my call about train times between Holyhead and Manchester, they are far more likely to be aware of where you are travelling than would any equivalent operators in China. Apart from anything else, they probably have relatives in Britain.

And it is the Indian presence in Britain which marks the other end of this linguistic continuity. British people are familiar with (British dialects of) Indian English as a result of several generations of immigration. When 'The Kumars at Number 42' became successful, I heard local English kids using its catch-phrases and copying its speech rhythms, just as they did when 'Crocodile Dundee' made them play with Australian English. There are parallels in the literary world. Suhayl Saadi's new novel, *Psychoraag*, is an amazing mixture of South Asian English (Urdu, in this case), Standard English, and Glaswegian. We ain't seen nothin' yet.

And India is special in one other respect. Alongside the spread of English there is a powerful concern for the maintenance of indigenous languages. I repeatedly heard young students express the need for a balance between an outward-looking language of empowerment and an inward-looking language of identity. CHOOSE YOUR LANGUAGE FOR YOUR POWER BILL, says one of the Mumbai billboards, offering Marathi, Hindi, Gujarathi, and English. Many of the smaller tribal languages are seriously endangered, there is no denying it, but there is an enviable awareness of the problem which is lacking in many Western countries. India, it seems, can teach the rest of the world some lessons not only about multidialectism but about multilingualism too.