

Promiscuity of the British Tongue and Global Lexicons: Reflections of an Anglophile

Dr. Susan G. Varghese

Assistant Professor of English,
Pioneer Kumaraswamy College, Nagercoil-629003
*Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627012,
Tamilnadu, India*

Abstract

English is no more the monopoly of Britons; nor is she the duopoly of Anglo-Americans. She is a globe-trotter reared and reinvigorated in different countries by diverse communities. The idiot box and internet have further widened her appeal. Her intimacy with different tongues is bound to change her basic character. She is willy-nilly forced to assume a multiple identity. Never before has the rhythm of change in her been faster. It is in the field of vocabulary rather than in that of syntax that purists feel English has sinned most as a result of its tendency to court and couple with words from other languages. One wakes up every morning to the admittance of new words, phrases and idioms. Even "achcha" and "foreign-returned" are said to have gained respectability as contributions from India. The attitude of the innovators seems to be that anything which facilitates communication is to be accepted. You may call this internationalized English "people-friendly lingua franca".

Keywords: Anglophile, lingua franca, global lexicon, Indianised English, Communication.

Introduction

The New Oxford Dictionary of English brought out in Britain in 2023 has done away with the distinction between "good English" and "correct English" in the interests of easier communication.

It is argued by reformers that English can no longer be a British language and that the Queen's English is an outmoded thing. The wide, wide world has now a strong claim to be used as the cultural perspective of the new global lexicon.

As Anglophiles addicted to BBC, I grieve at the ineluctable fact that the British tongue has ceased to be British. But then we live in times when oral purity and chastity of the tongue are at a discount. So not many are ruffled as they look around and spots the tendency of the British tongue to perpetuate its promiscuity.

Commenting on the gradual flirtation of American English with its British cousin, F.T. Wood warned long ago that their union might "produce a kind of hybrid language which is neither one nor the other" (272). He has pointed out how Uncle Sam has been bred in a more promiscuous ambience and is "cosmopolitan in character" and so "is much less conservative, and much less impatient of innovation than is its counterpart" (269). The learned linguist does not fail to notice "that people are becoming less squeamish about using, in both speech and writing, words that up to a generation ago were taboo on grounds of morals, delicacy or good taste" (269). Fearing the dilution of literary standards, Arnold in the 19th century warned Britons, "Whatever one may think of the general danger to the world from the Anglo-Saxon contagion, it appears to me difficult to deny that the growing greatness and influence of the United States does bring with it some danger to the ideal of a high and rare excellence" (34).

English is no more the monopoly of Britons; nor is she the duopoly of Anglo-Americans. She is a globe-trotter reared and reinvigorated in different countries by diverse communities. The idiot box and the internet have further widened her appeal.

Her intimacy with different tongues is bound to change her basic character. She is willy-nilly forced to assume a multiple identity. Neverbefore has the rhythm of change in her been faster. It is in the field of vocabulary rather than in that of syntax that purists feel English has sinned most as a result of its tendency to court and couple with words from other languages. One wakes up every morning to the admittance of new words, phrases and idioms. Even "achcha" and "foreign-returned" are said to have gained respectability as contributions from India. The attitude of the innovators seems to be that anything which facilitates communication is to be accepted. You may call this internationalized English "people-friendly lingua franca".

You can now afford to use non-British English without raising eyebrows. The compilers of new global lexicons are said to be at pains to ensure that they reflect with clarity and accuracy the way English is spoken across the five continents. Old grammatical diehards have had to beat a hasty retreat and let their newfangled foes split an infinitive with impunity.

In the area of grammar there is seen to be a growing trend towards simplification with the subjunctive mood falling gradually into disuse and verb conjugations being brought together under certain general types. The use of "whom" gradually has almost dropped out of use as an object pronoun. The prepositions in most interrogatives tend to be moved to the end. You sound rather outdated if you have them precede "what", "which", "where", "who" or "whose". One does not have to be any more concerned with the distinction between "Have you got" and "Do you have". "Will" years ago displaced "Shall" as the auxiliary in the first persons of the future tense of verbs.

Nissim Ezekiel's satirical use of Indian English has both amused and annoyed Indian readers. The use of colloquial English spoken here is satirized in poems like "The Patriot", "The Professor", "Soap", "from Very Indian Poem in Indian English" of his seventh collection, "Latter-Day Psalms" and "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa TS" of his sixth collection called *Hymns in Darkness*. "The Railway Clerk" also becomes the butt of one's ridicule. When people like him speak English, they tend to use the continuous tense instead of the simple present or simple past tense. This they probably do as they feel they can make their statement more emphatic. There are expressions in these poems which strain acceptability in British English or what academics here call "standard English". Some examples for them may be found in "goonda fellow" and "student unrest fellow" in "The Patriot", "humble residence" and "opposite house's backside" in "The Professor". The grammatical distortions of English carried over from some North Indian languages like Marathi, Gujarati or Hindi provide considerable comic material. A lot of humour emerges from unintentional words or phrases which are open to two interpretations, one of which is usually indecent as in "Pushpa Miss is never saying no. Whatever I or anybody is asking/she is always saying yes" (34-36). In the process of parodying their English, Ezekiel makes fun of Indians' craze for foreign visits as in the case of "The Railway Clerk", "some are thinking of foreign/ but due to circumstances, I cannot think" (32-33).

Most of the illustrations used in globally used dictionaries today are said to have been picked out of American English. Now how does an English teacher in India cope with the changes taking place in this British tongue? Is it not an uphill task for him or her to give an Indian student hard and fast rule for distinguishing standard English from its non-standard form? Australians, like Americans, consider their indigenous variety of English to be standard. Over a couple of centuries English has created a sizable number of new vernacular

words and construction patterns which are peculiar to India. The use, for example, of the native word, "tiffin", in some parts of South India for a light meal taken in the morning or evening, can be justified in the current topsy-turvy context as it has widely been used. Indian parents and children have long used "knickers" for "shorts". People using British English have pointed out to the embarrassment of the Indianised English speaker that "knickers" in British English means "a piece of women's underwear that covers the body from the waist to the tops of the legs" as Homby's dictionary defines it (def.1). "Cinema" is not the same thing as a film or movie as some people think. A "cot" in Indian English can mean an adult's "bedstead" as well. One can no longer be blamed for miscalling "boot" "dickey". One feels that a pair of "flip-flops" is no more wrongly called "slippers". A "printer's devil" is being recognised as the Indian-English cousin of British "misprint". The opposite partner of British "postpone" is the Indian "prepone". The words "suite" and "suit" in most parts of India have become homophones as the former's association with "sweet" in sound is no longer seen. English teachers do not have to find fault with their pupils for confusing the sound of "where" with that of "were". "Are" and "or" can be left alone when they are Indianised and the similarity in sound is insisted on. "Fete" and "fate" have to be separated as they seem to sound different in Indian English.

British English users in this part of the world need to know that they commit a linguistic faux pas when they use the word "spinster", for the word has fallen into disrepute and is ostracised as an outcast. Out have gone words like "authoress" and "poetess" convicted of blatant sexism. Among the culprits that outrage the sensibilities of the disabled, or the differently abled, today are "harelip", "spastic", "cripple" and "deaf-mute". Although one lives in a permissive society these days, one is not permitted to suggest even in language inequality of the sexes. So one can no longer use "man" or "mankind" to signify "all men and women". "Humanity", "the human race", "human beings" and "people" have replaced the two male chauvinist abominations. You can today head a school and have a mistress but you can never have the title of a "headmistress". The frown of an old headmistress can better be imagined than described if one were to refer to her as a "headteacher". One fails to figure out why today one is obliged to say "a woman doctor", "a woman teacher", "a woman lawyer" but discouraged from referring to them as a female doctor" and so on when one is free to use male before a doctor, teacher, lawyer, secretary, nurse and others.

A prim "Professor Grammar" in our midst, can hardly stomach the fact that "they" is allowed to be used as a pronoun to refer to a person when specification of the sex is not sought. We know "brevity is the soul of wit" and so one is asked to be brief and to the point and avoid being long-winded. Most celebrated grammar books like Wren and Martin have taught us that "someone", "somebody", "anyone", "anybody", "no one", "nobody", "everyone" and "everybody" have a singular verb. Therefore, personal pronouns and possessive adjectives have to be logically "he" or "she", "him" or "her" and "his" or "hers". However, in current English plural forms are to be preferred. One does not now object to your question tag. "No one saw Tom go out, did they?" Thank the Lord in Heaven we are left free to continue using "it" with "something", "anything", "everything" and "nothing".

Conclusion

In this context of flexibility and freedom one wonders whether the third edition of the standard Oxford English Dictionary (OED), which its makers have been sweating blood to bring out in 2037, is likely to end up as an exercise in futility. They struggle to cope up with the information overload of the digital age. To quote the words of Irish times, "The objective is to find the earliest and most illustrative uses of a word, not to grant benediction to anything as "proper English." Some ask with glee whether the new dictionaries to come out in Britain will aim to abolish the kind of apartheid that British English has been practising. Has the day arrived when one no longer has to segregate a sentence structure like "We are shifting to our new house" or "In which college do you study", as non-British? Purists put on a long face and point out that the literary dictator, Dr. Samuel Johnson, "realised the danger as long ago as the middle of the eighteenth century, when he declared that language had a natural tendency to degeneration against which we must be constantly on our guard" (qtd. in Wood 273).

Works Cited

- Arnold, Matthew. *Essays in Criticism*. London: Macmillan, 1966.
- Ezekiel, Nissim. *Collected Poems: 1952-1988*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- "Knickers." Def.1. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English-7th ed.* 2005.
- Wood, Frederick T. *An Outline History of the English Language*. Hongkong: Macmillan, 1971.

Net source

<http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/deadline-023-the-making-of-the-next-oxford-english-dictionary-1.1667328>

