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Role of English as a Tool for Communication in Tamil Society

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Interest in the Study of English

There has always been great interest in the study of English among the Tamils. However, this interest in the study of English has not resulted in noticeable widespread achievement in the use of English. Tamils have had a significant part in the development of English as an effective medium of writing fiction and even poetry.

For example, K. S. Venkataramani is one of the early masters of Indian writing in English. His deft handling of English is well recognized. He brought Indian atmosphere effortlessly in his writing in English.

The gypsy beggar is the lay extempore astrologer of Hindu society. He believes more in his own cleverness than in the possibility of distant planets exerting any influence over our destinies. So, all his glib predictions are cunningly coined phrases of certain universal currency, got out of a memory which is a rich storehouse of such jeweled *wampums*. He is a very clever and amiable student of human nature, remarkable for his intuitive powers. He can feel your thought pulses ten beats in advance. He is keen observer of men and things. He is all sagacity when he is charting, in rotund phrases of mellow felicity, the immediate future of a “pumpkin-bellied” landlord in whose house he has generously posted himself. He is a sweet talker, a consummate master of honeyed words, so long as there is a chance for alms. If he be repulsed, hard fighter as he is, he reverses all his rosy predictions, and curses with all the solemnity of an injured sage; for this he is sometimes well paid in ringing knocks and blows. Still in adversity, the advertising energy of his little drum which beats the eternal *kudu, kudu*, which means in Tamil “give, give,” is immense. ... (Venkataramani, 1921).

Likewise, in recent years, R. K. Narayan masterfully used English and he also came from the Tamil background.

Literary Achievement Not the Sole Yardstick – Why So?

While the level and achievement in creative writing should not be taken as the yardstick of the level of achievement in English, everyday writing in English among students with Tamil background is yet to reach significant levels of mastery. In other words, a desire to learn and use English is growing strong among the Tamils, but the ground reality is that the skill in using English does not keep pace with this desire.

Again one of the early attempts for the effective teaching and learning of English immediately after Independence began in Madras State, which adopted a campaign called Madras English Language Teaching campaign. The campaign began with the recommendation of a great educationist/linguistics scholar, Penfield, who insisted that early learning of another language before lateralization takes effect in human brain will lead to greater mastery of that language in children.

All these have not borne much fruit for various reasons. Primarily the skill level of English teachers in elementary and high schools is not adequate enough. Most rural families from which students come to attend these schools do not have any real exposure to continued use of English in their daily life. Political motivations and loyalty to our own Indian languages also may work against our ability to master this language adequately. And yet, often at work places, we do learn how to use English formally to meet our formal needs. But these reasons and contexts are not the focus of this article.

Globalization, Acquisition of English and Tamilnadu

Acquiring English language as a communication tool in the era of globalization has become mandatory for those who wish to participate in globalization and take advantage of what globalization offers in terms of culture, job, travel, technical knowledge and practice. It has come to pass that most of us in Tamilnadu have no other choice but to learn English if one wishes to be a global participant. English has become a necessary tool.

English as an International/Global language

What does a Global Language mean? Global English refers almost literally to the use of English as a global language. It means a common language for the world. A language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country. Having such a status, the global language has to be of great importance, influencing all the domains of the human activity in the world. For example, English dominates every field such as the media, foreign language teaching, business, etc. English can be called an international language because of its simple and wide use already.

While English is not an official language in most countries, it is currently the language most often taught as a second language around the world. Today, we should acknowledge the fact that English is sweeping the earth's physical, economic, cultural and virtual space. English is the language of pop-culture, of tourism, of markets, of the Internet and trade. Several people speak English with their friends, and people get introduced to each other most often in English. Over half of all personal letters/sms/E-mails are also written in English. English encompasses more than just a convenient means of communication among people around the world.

Is English a Communication Tool to Understand Other (Western) Cultures?

The thinning of national borders due to globalization has made English a global communication tool. In one way or the other, every language is a pathway to understand its parent culture, because each language contains the unconscious assumption of that culture. This certainly is true of English which provides us an opportunity to know the culture that it generally represents. This we learn through various media including stories/fiction, movies, and so on. However, the focus of learning English in India is no more to learn about the culture it represents. Slowly and steadily, and certainly consciously, English that we learn has shed its original contextual and cultural features and has received a strong Indian coating of colors and re-interpretation of culture-laden lexicon and idiomatic expressions.

As Thirumalai points out, “most nations have embarked upon a process of textbook contextualization when it comes to teaching English. The original pieces of writing by the native speakers of English are sought to be replaced by the writings of the nationals who are masters of English prose and poetry. In their creative writing through English, writers make use of metaphors, idioms, and set phrases from the national languages, which imply local culture and religion, and these are more freely used. Translations from the local tales are more frequently substituted for tales from Europe. In addition, government-inspired documents on ideology become part of the textbook. Nations (and individuals) want to appropriate English as a language minus the culture and religion it represents and communicates.” (<http://www.languageinindia.com/april2002/tesolbook.html#chapter1>)

So, the English we learn in India is the result of some conscious effort at the Indianization of English. The process began long before India attained independence, but the process became more dynamic and forceful after Independence.

English in India

Officially English is accorded the status of associate official language but, in fact, it has become the most important language of India, despite political opposition. After Hindi it is the most commonly used, read and written language in India. In the present scenario it is mandatory for any employable Indian in the global market to have some proficiency in English. Proficiency in English has become an added merit for Indians in all fields including legal, financial, educational, and business in India.

English as Perceived by Indians

The role of English within the complex multilingual society of India is far from straightforward: it is used across the country, but it may be a speaker's first, second, or third language, and its features may depend heavily on the regional origin of the speaker. Indians who know English will always try to show off that they know English. Rightly or wrongly, English has come to symbolize better education and higher intellect for many Indians. It is a status marker for Indians. Indians who know English often mingle English words with Indian languages in their conversations. It is also usual among Indians to abruptly move to speak fluent English in the middle of their conversations

in Indian languages. English also serves as the communicator or bridge among Indians who speak different languages.

Influence of Western English on Indian English

Because of the growing influence of American culture in recent years, certain elements of American slang are now used by some Indians, especially younger ones. American English spellings are also widely prevalent in scientific and technical publications, while British English spellings are used in other media. The form of English that Indians are taught in schools in Tamilnadu and elsewhere in India is essentially modeled after British English. In India the institutions or schools which emphasize English are considered “better” schools and the same is the case at the university level too, even though there is a slight trend towards adopting Tamil in Tamilnadu as medium of instruction at the college and university levels. Similar conditions prevail also in other states of India.

Since the 1970s many schools, mostly privately operated schools, have English in their curriculum as the first language. For most of these students, English is their first language in the curriculum but not in their homes. As they are all learning English and learning other subjects using English it should have been easier for them to communicate, read and write in English. This was and is not the case. At the same, the pathetic plight of the Indian students is that they feel ashamed to use their mother tongue and they are blissfully ignorant of their mother tongue.

Uniqueness of Indian English – Roots of Indian English

Just like the Americans, Australians or the English, who have their unique English words and phrases, Indians also have their own unique English. Indians and the Indian English language press use many words derived from Indian languages, especially from Hindi and other major languages such as Tamil. There is a growing tendency to use words from the local languages in the printed newspapers. This practice, we should remember, is not something started just by the Indians. The Britishers, for want of appropriate English words to describe Indian elements in various contexts and fields, began using Indian language words. We see this even in the earliest records in East India Company. I am sure that the other East India Companies such as those run by the French and the Dutch, would have also necessarily adopted this technique. In addition to such mixing, Indian accent also comes to play an important role in our deliberations in English.

Problems of accent have been noticed by many customers and corporations engaged in outsourcing in recent years. Indian accent becomes difficult for non-Indians to understand, especially when it is strong and when the speech is delivered with typical Indian speed! There are other peculiarities, such as our inability to speak and write in plain English, which also come to play a role.

Indian English

The fact that we have our own brand of English is ably exploited for our own enjoyment (and for the enjoyment of those native speakers who have had some acquaintance with Indian English) by a

great Indian English poet, Nissim Ezekiel. While Venkataramani, R. K. Narayan, and a host of other able and prominent creative writers of fiction focus/focused their attention to their narrative, Nissim simply used Indian English as *the narrative*!

A classic example for Indian English and how an Indian uses English language to put forth his ideas is seen crystal clear in some of the poems of Nissim Ezekiel who portrays the realistic picture of Indian English. The following poems exemplify this fact: “A very Indian Poem in Indian English”, “Goodbye Party to Miss Pushpa T. S.”, “The professor”. As Thirumalai points out, Nissim Ezekiel made a “clever use of Indian English as a means to explore the Indian mind and sensibility. Nissim's writing is an embodiment of the best of Indian civilization and tradition. An Indian Jew by birth, Nissim Ezekiel transcended all borders and spoke the voice of love and sanity. What insightful observations of our own life and thoughts! What a love for freedom of expression and oneness of humanity! In his hands, our English came to life in ways that we never would have dreamt!” (<http://www.languageinindia.com/feb2004/nissim.html>).

Let me just cite only one stanza as an example from one of his poems to show the typical way how a learner of second language thinks and speaks.

The Patriot

I am standing for peace and non-violence.
Why world is fighting fighting
Why all people of world
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,
I am simply not understanding.
Ancient Indian Wisdom is 100% correct,
I should say even 200% correct,
But modern generation is neglecting-
Too much going for fashion and foreign thing.

Varieties of Indian English

The distinct evolution of regional variations in contemporary usage has led to terms such as Hinglish (Hindi+ English), Kanglish (Kannada+ English), Telgish (Telugu+ English), Tanglish (tamil+ English), and Minglish (Marathi + English). Hinglish and other variations are popular in the field of advertising. The aim of reaching a large cross-section of society is fulfilled by such double-coding. Many words borrowed from Indian languages find their way into the ostensibly-English media. While Indian speakers of English use idioms peculiar to their homeland, they also use often literal translations of words and phrases from their native languages.

Indian-ness in English

Identifying Indian words used in English has been a fascination with Indians, probably soon after the rule of the East India Company was established. The celebrated work of *Hobson Jobson Dictionary* of Henry Yule and Arthur C. Burnell 1886 provides a very interesting history of such words in the English language. One of the authors Arthur Burnell began his work in Tanjore (Thanjavur) in the heartland of Tamilnadu! *Hobson-Jobson Dictionary* records: "ARTHUR BURNELL, of the Madras Civil Service, one of the most eminent of modern Indian scholars, who during the course of our communications was filling judicial offices in Southern and Western India, chiefly at Tanjore." The preface further records,

WORDS of Indian origin have been insinuating themselves into English ever since the end of the reign of Elizabeth and the beginning of that of King James, when such terms as *calico*, *chintz*, and *gingham* had already effected a lodgment in English warehouses and shops, and were lying in wait for entrance into English literature. Such outlandish guests grew more frequent 120 years ago, when, soon after the middle of last century, the numbers of Englishmen in the Indian services, civil and military, expanded with the great acquisition of dominion then made by the Company; and we meet them in vastly greater abundance now. (<http://www.bibliomania.com/2/3/260/frameset.html>)

English Words of Tamil Origin

It is amazing to know that there is a Tamil word in the Bible. King Solomon's ships traveled to exotic lands and famously brought back "ivory, apes, and peacocks" (I Kings 10:22). In the Hebrew text, the word used for 'peacock' is *tukki*, which comes from the Tamil word for peacock: *thokai*. This shows the great antiquity of the Tamil civilization. Here are several words that the ancient and noble Tamil language has given to English. English Words of Tamil origin borrowed directly from Tamil (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_English_words_of_Tamil_origin).

Appam from Tamil *appam*

Cash comes from Tamil *kācu*

Catamaran from Tamil *kaṭṭumaram*

Cheroot from Tamil *curuṭṭu*, roll or rolled

Corundum from a Tamil word for 'ruby', *kuruntam* or *kuruvintam*

Coir from the Tamil word *kayaru*

Curry from Tamil *kaṛi*, sauce

Godown from *kidangu/kodangu* a Tamil word for store room (Source: OED)

Coolie from *cooli* a Tamil word for labour.

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Idly from Tamil *idli*

Maldivian from Tamil *malaidhivu*("malai"=mountain, "theevu"=island),

Moringa from *murungai* , a Tamil word for drumstick

Mulligatawani from Tamil *miḷaku-taṇṇīr* from *miḷaku* black pepper *taṇṇīr*, water

Pariah from Tamil *paraiyar* , plural of *paraiyan*

Pandal from Tamil *pandal*

Poppadam from *appalam* a Tamil word for a crispy side dish

Portia tree from Tamil *puvaracu*

Sangam from Tamil *sancam*

Teak from Tamil *thecku*

Tope from Tamil *thoppu*

Chutney sauce made by blending the ingredients

Copra *kopparai / koppara*)

poon — this is the strong, lightweight wood of a tree (*Calophyllum* sp.) of southern India and Sri Lanka, useful in shipbuilding, called *pūna* in Sinhalese, from the Tamil word *punnai*.

Indian-ness of Indian English

Indian-ness of Indian English is another interesting field, proudly indulged in by all of us. Scholarly research contribution in this area is very significant - descriptive, prescriptive, humorous, cynical and satirical in its scope. However, work relating to the contributions of Tamil and Tamils in this area needs more concentrated attention in the future.

One thing is clear: this is a very dynamic area of influence all over India and on all the peoples in South Asia. This also is an area which may not exhibit self-restraint as more and more young people make it their fascination to add to what is going on!

How do we bring in some regulation which is commonly accepted and put in practice is an important question that we all need to raise.

Indian Literature in English

India is the third largest English book producing country after the US and the UK, and the largest number of books in India is published in English, not in Indian languages. Creative writing in

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English has become an integral part of the Indian literary tradition for many years. Many perceive English as having released the local languages from rigid classical traditions that could be an obstacle while writing ... many may perceive the accent, terminology, and conversational style as “funny”, in reality it is just a different English that cannot simply be equated with either American or British English. (<http://www.chillibreeze.com/EnglishinIndia.asp>).

The Future of English in India and among the Tamils

The Future of English in India and among the Tamils seems to be really secure. While, now and then, some politicians, big and small, may speak against the continuance of English, a language of those who enslaved the nation and who ruled and exploited it for centuries, nobody seems to give credence to their passionate protest against the use of English! Possibly their own family members listen but fail to follow such solemn declarations. The English language is already well established in the country and has acquired its own independent identity. English among the Tamils will continue to evolve, establishing itself some standards of its own, possibly in lexical choice and even lexical creation, even as it moves toward an identity of some sorts with the standard Indian English.

We already have great admiration for the flowery speech of “Silver-tongued” Srinivasa Sastry during the days of the British rule, and then C. N. Annadurai’s alliteration even in his fiery, descriptive, liberating, satirical, and flowery speech with great fluency in English continues to ring in the ears of millions of Tamils and those who occupy corridors of power in Tamilnadu. There are also other great leaders and journalists among Tamils, both in the past and the present times, whose contributions to the study of English and its use will continue to be remembered and emulated.

Kamaraj and Karunanidhi are not known for their English mastery. Karunanidhi transfers his mastery of lexical choice, and elegantly encoded wit and wisdom easily to his English discourse, in an amazing manner. His English carries with it his distinct style he adopts to deliver his great oratory and skillful writing. Kamaraj, on the other hand, certainly laid the groundwork for the expansion of facilities to learn English in the schools of Tamilnadu through his government opening sections of English medium classes in government schools. Kamaraj spoke simple and direct English and this will continue to be a great model, with delicacy, innocence and all the flavor of Indian English, for those in the rural areas and the less privileged in urban centres of Tamilnadu, who may not go all the way to the pinnacle of university education. Rajaji’s expository prose, Venkataramani’s passionate descriptive style and his manifest desire to portray the rural masses, and R. K. Narayan’s effortless English will inspire the students of Tamilnadu, but, somehow, the present sadly seems to have more vacuum in the arena of literary talents in English.

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Shanthi Nehemiah, M.A., M.Phil.
Department of English
Karunya University
Karunyanagar, Coimbatore
Tamilnadu, India
shanthi_nehemiah@yahoo.co.uk