

What Makes a Local English Distinctive?

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***Abstract:** This paper analyzes the aspects that make a local English distinctive by taking Indian English as an example and examining its distinctive characteristics through applying a framework of the feature-based approaches. Firstly, a general introduction is provided to review the emergence of the various varieties of English in different places. Then, a framework of the feature-based approaches is to be introduced in the second part. In addition, a detailed sample-based analysis of the characteristics of the Indian English is to be presented from the perspectives of phonology, lexis, grammar, and discourse respectively. At last, a conclusion is to be drawn about what has been discussed in this paper.*

***Key Words:** Indian English, distinctive characteristics, feature-based approaches*

1. Introduction

The spread of English results in the emergence of various varieties of English around the world. Different scholars (for example, Fennell 2001; Crystal 1997; Svartvik & Leech 2006; Trudgill & Hannah 1994) deal with the phenomenon in different ways. Jenkins (2003) thinks that there are two dispersals for the spread of English. During the first dispersal English is transported to the 'new world' of the North America, Australia, and New Zealand, while in the second dispersal English is spread to Asia and Africa. Similarly, B. Kachru (1992) puts forward a model of the spread of English around the world with three concentric circles: The Inner Circle referring to countries such as UK and USA where English is their native language; The Outer Circle including such countries as India and Singapore where English is taken as a second language; And the Expanding Circle encompasses countries such as China and Japan where English is treated as a foreign language.

Wherever it is brought into, English develops as time goes by and as its users constantly contact with the outside world. As a result, this developed language of English becomes different more or less in a certain way from the Standard English in Britain (EngEng) and America. With more and more former colonized nations become independent after the WWII and with the globalisation of the world economy, this development of English in the former colonized places becomes faster, and more salient features can be noted distinctive from the British and American

English. The newly-featured English come into being partly because of the original mixtures of dialects and accents among the colonizers, and partly because of the indigenous languages (Jenkins 2003). The nativization and indigenization of English (Kachru & Nelson 2006) brings forth the emergence of new varieties of English, for example, Australian English, Indian English, Singaporean English, and so on. And these varieties of English become localized with features distinctive in such aspects as pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and discourse, etc.

2. The feature-based approaches

Bolton (2006) points out two broad approaches to research these new Englishes or world Englishes. One is the English Studies Approach that developed historically from the description of English tradition. Another is the sociolinguistic approaches which can be subdivided into such four major ones as the sociology of language, feature-based approaches, Kachruvian studies, and pidgin and creole studies. This paper is to take the “feature-based” approaches as a framework for the following analysis.

The feature-based approaches to these new varieties of Englishes are majorly advocated in the studies of these linguists such as Cheshire (1991), Trudgill and Hannah (2002), etc, by identifying the distinctive features of these varieties in terms of phonology, lexis, and grammar. Trudgill and Hannah (1994) describe the features of these varieties of English in terms of phonetics, phonology, vocabulary, and grammar by examining samples of such local Englishes from Australia, India, New Zealand, and the West Indies, etc. In this paper a framework of the aspects of the features is proposed to approach a local English in terms of phonology, lexis, grammar, and discourse by taking samples from one of the varieties of English—Indian English.

3. Analysis of the distinctive characteristics

As one of the 15 official languages in India, English in India enjoys an associate status majorly for political and commercial purposes (Svartvik & Leech 2006). English is widely used with an immense influence in such fields as newspapers, TV, publications, etc, (Gargesh 2006). This widely use of English in the multilingual Indian context makes it in constant contact with the local languages (Kachru & Nelson 2006). As a result, to suit the need of communication in this particular context, English in India is strongly influenced by the local languages in various aspects and exhibits distinctive characteristics. This part is to analyze what and how these aspects make a local English distinctive by taking Indian English as an example in terms of pronunciation, lexis, grammar, and discourse.

3.1 Phonology

According to Kachru & Nelson (2006), there are phonological differences across all varieties of English. This section is to discuss some phonological features of Indian English through a recording (Sample I) (see Appendix I) from The International Dialects of English

Archive (IDEA). The recoding is about a speech made by a 20 year-old graduate student from Northern India. The distinctive phonological features within this sample can be noted as follows:

To begin with, the vowels in the words *own* in Line 3 and *case* in Line 9 are realised as the monophthongs [e] and [o] respectively, but not as diphthongs [ei] and [ou] as in standard British or American English. Secondly, the interdental fricative [θ] is articulated as dental aspirated voiceless stop [t^h] in the word *through*, Line 1. Similarly, the interdental fricative [ð] tends to be articulated as dental aspirated voiced [d] in such words as *that*, *the*, *their*, etc within this sample. Besides, a feature about the northern Indian English accent can be found the word *speak* in Line 11 that the initial sound cluster [sp] tends to receive a preceding [i:]. Trudgill & Hannah (1994) point out that such case also occurs in the initial clusters such as [sk] and [st] of a word. Moreover, the sounds /t/, /p/, and /k/, initiating such words as *to* in Line 6, *totally* in Line 5, *part* in Line 6, and *case* in Line 9, are not articulated as the aspirated [t^h], [p^h], and [k^h] as in standard British or American English, but as the unaspirated [t], [p], and [k] respectively. At last, the alveolar consonants [t] in such words as *accent* and *phonetics* in Line 4, and [d] for the first d in word *understand* in Line 7 tend to be retroflexed as [ɖ] and [ɗ] respectively.

These features show the distinctiveness of Indian English in the aspect of phonology. However, there are other distinctive phonological features such as stress and rhythm in Indian English which are not included in this sample, but widely described (see B. Kachru 1983).

3.2 Lexis

Vocabulary changes in the history of English, and many new words are either invented, or borrowed from other languages, or words are extended or altered in usage when language users encounter new ideas in their contact with the outside environment. Next is a sample (Sample II) (see Appendix II) taken from *The Hindustan Times Online* (cited in Fennell 2001) that can show the distinctiveness of Indian English in lexis.

This sample is a description of the scene when Hindu devotees go bathing in the river. This sample is featured with quite a lot of new words borrowed from Hindi. Thus, readers who do not know Hindi may be strange to some words such as *lakhs*, *Amavasya*, *Purnima*, *ghat*, *Khudisa*, *Kachcha*, *alms*, *raddi*, *kabaris*, and *pandits*, etc if without explanations to them. Specifically, following distinctive features about the lexis of Indian English can be found according to this sample.

Firstly, terms for units of measurement are borrowed from the indigenous language of Hindi. For example, the word *lakh* is a unit in Hindi showing 100 thousand Rupees (Indian currency). Another example is given by Gargesh (2006) about the use of Hindi words such as *Crore* (means 10 million) as the units of measurement in the Annual Report 2002–3 of the Indian Government. Secondly, words about religious events related to the particular Indian culture are borrowed into Indian English. Within this text, the words *Amavasya* and *Purnima* refer to the

occasions of religious events when thousands of devotees go bathing in the sacred river. Non-Indian readers may not be able to understand the text if this particular concept of the Indian religion and culture embodied in these words is not explained to them. Another word borrowed from Hindi is *pandit* which literarily means a wise or learned man in India. But in the particular Indian culture, it refers to those men who are not only knowledgeable but also enjoy relatively honorary status and titles. The vocabulary shows the distinctiveness of the Indian culture reflected in Indian English. The above two points to some degree actually show how nativization of English happens in the Indian context. However, the process of appropriation and acculturation of English is also a distinctive feature of a local English. According to Gargesh (2006), it is the process of appropriation, nativization, and acculturation of English in India that has given us the distinctive variety of English—the Indian English. A third point is the appropriation of the expression of “*giving them alms*”. This phrase used to be popularly used in the Old English times, but has already become a little bit out of date now and is seldom used in British and American English. However, this archaic phrase is appropriated into the Indian context meaning doing charities to relieve the needy or the poor. This continuation and extension of the archaic forms of lexis in the Indian context also makes Indian English distinctive from the Inner-Circle varieties.

3.3 Grammar

Rules in grammar make it relatively stable. Thus, there will be no huge differences in grammatical systems for a same language used in different places. And it can be argued that the grammatical system in Indian English is the same as that in British English, since Indian English and British English belong to the same language. However, grammatical differences do exist in India English because it is inevitably influenced by its constant contact with the local languages. This section is to analyze how Indian English is distinctive in grammar from the perspectives of morphology and syntax by taking a sample (Sample III) from *Kanthapura*, a novel written by an Indian writer Raja Rao (1974). The sample (see Appendix III) is an excerpt of 48 lines from pages 17 to 20 of the novel.

3.3.1 Morphology

According to this sample, some following morphological features are different from the standard British English in the use of nouns, articles, adverbs, and modal auxiliary verbs, etc.

Firstly, attention is to be invited into Line 34. The special way of using the word *water* is in plural form. Usually, the word *water* is uncountable noun, and used as mass noun. When used in plural form, it means mass of water in areas such as in a lake or a river. While within the context of this sample, it means some liquid that is drinkable. Therefore, in standard British English it will be used in the uncountable form. In fact, this case exemplifies a distinctive feature of Indian English in using the pluralisation of many mass nouns differently. Similar examples are listed by

Trudgill and Hannah (1994), for instance, *aircrafts, fruits, furnitures, woods*, etc. Another case within this sample is the word *work* in Line 9. In the sentence it refers to something specific or a task that someone can do to live on it. Thus a specific noun *job* is more appropriate here than the mass noun *work*. And in EngEng it is usually said as *jobless* rather than *workless*.

Secondly, the use of articles *the* in Line 37 may be unfamiliar to those speakers from the Inner-circle varieties. In these two lines, the article *the* is used in front of a proper noun *Mahatma*, a person's name. However, in EngEng and other varieties such as Australian English, North American English, *the* will not occur with proper nouns. B. Kachru (1983) points out that it is a distinctive feature in Indian English that articles are used in ways unfamiliar to the Inner-Circle varieties, for example, *the* can occur with proper nouns as in *the Mahatma Gandhi*.

Thirdly, the different use of some modal auxiliary verbs such as *can, could, will, would*, is observable in Indian English. In Line 44, the auxiliary *could* rather than its present form *can* is used when the speaker will not be able to spare time to spin. In EngEng, speakers tend to say the sentence in Line 44 like this: "and may be I *can* never find time to spin". The favored use of the past tense form of some auxiliaries instead of their present forms in the Indian context is because Indian English speakers think the past forms are more tentative and thus more polite (Trudgill and Hannah 1994). For example, in EngEng people say "the lecture *will* begin at 2:00", while in Indian English, people say "the lecture *would* begin at 2:00".

3.3.2 Syntax

The syntactical features of Indian English have been described in many studies (B. Kachru 1983, 1994; S. Sridhar 1996; and Bhatt 2004), which reflect the influence of the Indian English speakers' mother tongues. In this sample, several syntactical features in Indian English are easy to be found.

First of all, examples of the absence of subject-auxiliary/verb inversion in direct questions can be attested in Line 4 and Line 13 respectively: "*How much has one to pay?*" and "*have you fine rice?*", which is exactly opposite to the EngEng usage. In EngEng, these two sentences will be like this: "*How much does one have to pay?*" and "*do you have fine rice?*" More examples of this syntactical feature can be found in the Indian context, such as "*What you would like to read?*" and "*When you would like to come?*" (Gargesh 2006).

Besides, the sentence in Line 12 illustrates the use of future forms in temporal and conditional clauses where EngEng would require present tense form. The sentence in Line 12 is a conditional clause, and it will be like this "..., *if you sell more than twenty khandas?*" in the Inner-Circle varieties. But in the Indian context, a future form is used in this conditional clause. One similar example is provided by Trudgill and Hannah (1994) that in EngEng people say "*If I come, I will see you?*", while in Indian English it will be said as "*If I will come, I will see you?*".

In addition, it is also noticeable that there are differences in compliment structures in using prepositions after some verbs in Indian English in this sample. In Line 28, for the sentence of “We haven’t swallowed it *all*“, the speaker means to express that they have not consumed all the rice up. The influence of the mother tongue is apparent here. However, it is intelligible though the speaker does not speak in the EngEng way as “We haven’t swallowed it (*all*) *up*“. Another example is in Line 43 where the preposition *at* is used to introduce a complement structure after the verb *occupy*. But in EngEng, the proposition following the verb *occupy* is either *in* or *with* rather than *at*.

One more distinctive feature of Indian English is exemplified in Sample IV (Appendix IV). This sample is an excerpt from a poem *The Patriot* by an Indian poet Nissim Ezekiel, an Indian nationalist, who chooses to write in the Indian variety of English. A striking feature within this sample is the deviant use of the progressive aspect compared to the EngEng. For example, “*I am standing* for peace and non-violence” (I stand for peace and non-violence), “*I am simply not understanding*” (I simply do not understand), and “But modern generation *is neglecting* (but modern generation neglects).” The feature of using of present progressive with habitual action, completed action, and stative verbs is also described by Kachru & Nelson (2006), Trudgill and Hannah (1994) and Gargesh (2006). For instance, “I am having a cold” (“I have a cold”), and “I am loving it” (ad for MacDonald’s). Another striking feature in sample IV is the lack of article *the* in front of the word *world* in the second line and in front of the word *modern* in the last line respectively.

Other distinctive syntactical features are not to be discussed in these above samples but also widely described by other scholars. For instance, the widespread use of *isn’t it* or *no* in tag questions, e.g., “You went there yesterday, *isn’t it?*” and “You went their yesterday, *no?*” (see Gargesh 2006).

3.4 Discourse

The way of talking can show the discourse style of a certain regional culture and community. And the discourse style is highly related to its cultural background and is influenced by its mother tongue. Take sample III as an example. In Line 15, the structure of the thematic information is deviant from the EngEng in the sentence of “*This looks beautiful rice*” (EngEng: “this rice looks beautiful”), the initial element *this* is the theme of this sentence, while the element following the main verb *beautiful rice* is the focus of the sentence. But in the context of this sentence, the theme *this* actually refers to the final element of the focus, thus the way of discourse in this sentence weakens the effect of the speaker’s comment on the rice. Besides, in Line 20, the sentence “*the rice may go down in the price*” show the influence of mother tongue. When it comes to the description of the going down in price, EngEng speakers tend to say the price of some products may go down (thus, the above sentence should be “*the rice’s price may go down*”), rather than these products themselves may go down. Other discursal features such

as the code mixed style of using English and other Indian languages and politeness which can show the distinctiveness of the Indian English are also widely discussed (see Kachru & Nelson 2006; B. Kachru 2003; Y. Kachru 2001, 2003; Pandey, 2004; K. Sridhar, 1991; Smith (1987).

4. Conclusion

Before the conclusion of this paper, it is necessary to explain that it is impossible to provide an exhaustive list of all aspects which can show how to make a local English distinctive, since there are too many different examples in a variety of English. What is more, any variety of English is in constant change as time goes by. However, by applying the feature-based approach, this paper has analyzed what makes a local English distinctive by taking Indian English as an example in terms of phonology, lexis, grammar, and discourse based on four samples. And this paper has also pointed out that the distinctive features of a local English in lexis and grammar, and discourse, etc are closely related to its special culture and society, and are strongly influenced by its mother tongue. Thus, it can be concluded that it is the specificity of aspects such as phonology, lexis, grammar, and discourse that makes a local English distinctive.

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Appendix I

Transcription for Sample I

1 Anybody will, if they look th[t^h]rough the history, will find th[d]at India has 16
 2 major languages. There's... Those are nat...uh... nationally recognized
 3 languages. They have th[d]eir o[o]wn, their have... they have..., each one has
 4 its own grammar. Each one has its own..., own accent[t] and 'phonet[t]ics,
 5 everything is t[t]otally different from the other language. So if I go from
 6 Rajasthan t[t]o let's say the Southern p[p]art of India, I won't be able t[t]o
 7 und[d]erstand the language in the other state. So th[d]ere are 25 states and
 8 nearly all of th[d]em have a... have a... have a language of th[d]eir own. And not
 9 only th[d]at, each language has its own dialects, so th[d]at, just in c[k]a[e]se
 10 of England, we find th[d]at if you go to the northern p[p]art of England they,
 11 they speak[ispi:k] in a different... they speak in a different t[t]one, they-they,
 12 they speak in a different..., they have different accent.

(From *The International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA)*,
 <<http://web.ku.edu/idea/asia/india/india.htm>> Last accessed 23rd, January, 2015)

Appendix II

Sample II A River Most Foul

About 1,000 to 2,000 devotees take a dip in this river almost daily and their number swells to several *lakhs* on special occasions like *Amavasya* and *Purnima*. Moreover devotees come from neighbouring States like Punjab, Haryana and even beyond. We do have one *ghat* known as *Khudisa Ghat* there for such purposes. It is a pity that this place is kept as unclean and dirty as it can be. You enter a narrow *Kachcha* lane to go to this *ghat* and not only confront petty-vendors but also about 50-100 beggars on its both sides of the *ghats*. They literally bully you into giving them *alms* and can go to any extent—even hang on to your arm—for the purpose. During floods, which are an annual feature or during rains you have to wade through knee-deep water to reach the *ghat*. And what do you witness there? There are about a dozen *ghats* (*bathing places*) but none of them has the usual stairs where you can stand and have a normal dip. ...if you stroll around the *ghat* complex you notice heaps of *raddi* (consisting mostly of cardboard boxes, plastic bags, bottles and waste papers) being displayed prominently by *kabaris* in the space rented by the resident *pandits*.

(From *The Hindustan Times Online*, www.hindustantimes.com, 2 December 1998, by Subhash Goyal, cited in Fennell 2001)

Appendix III

Sample III

1 ...'if you spin *just* one hour a day, you can have a bodice-cloth of any colour or 2 breadth you like, one bodice-cloth per month, and a sari every six months. And 3 during the first month, the cotton is given free.'

4 'May I ask one thing, Moorthy? *How much has one to pay?*'

5 'Nothing, sister. I tell you the Congress gives it free.'

6 'Because millions and millions of yards of foreign cloth come to this country and

7 everything foreign makes us poor and pollutes us. To wear cloth spun and

8 woven with your own God-given hands is sacred, says the Mahatma. And it

9 gives *work* to the *workless*, and *work* to the poor...' (And) 'They will even pay

10 you nineteen rupees a khandas of paddy instead of eighteen rupees eight

11 annas, as Gold-Bangle Somanna or Mota Madanna would pay. *They will even*

12 *pay you nineteen rupees and two annas, if you will sell more than twenty*

13 *khandas*. ... (Then) you go to Subba Chetty and say, "He Chetty, *have you fine*

14 *rice?*"—"Why, I have fine rice," says he, and shows you rice white and small as

15 pearls, all husked and washed in the city. And you say, "*This looks beautiful*

16 *rice,*" and you pay one rupee for every three and a half seers. Now tell me,

17 Nanjamma, how much does Husking-Rangi ask from you for every twenty

18 measures of paddy?'

19 ...

20 'And who knows, *the rice may go down in the price*, as it did two years ago. So

21 you go to the agent and say, "all right. I can give you forty-four khandas." And,

22 as he opens his bag and counts out rupee after rupee, in the backyard they are

23 already saying, "Three. Hm--Four. Hm—Five, and the God's extra. Hm," their

24 gaping sacks before them. Night comes and our granary is empty as a

25 mourning-house. Then, the next morning, Husking Rangi meets you on your

26 way to the river, and says, "And when shall I come for the paddy,

27 mother?"—"let Dasara come, Rangi. We've *still* last year's rice. We haven't

28 swallowed it *all*," you say. But Rangi knows the truth, and when the rainy

29 season comes and there is little rice to eat, she will pass by your door and spit

30 three times at you in the name of her children. Then she too will go to work on

31 the fields with her husband. And so two work on a field that hardly needed one,

32 and the children will go foodless....you get poorer and poorer, and the pariahs

33 begin to starve, and one day all but Bhatta and Subba Chetty will have nothing

34 else to eat but the pebbles of the Himavathy, and drink her *waters* saying,

35 "Rama-Krishna, Rama- Krishna!" Sister, that is how it is...'

36 'Oh, I am *no* learned person,' explains Nanjamma. 'You have been to the city

37 and you should know more than me. But tell me, my son, does *the* Mahatma

38 spin?'

39 "*The* Mahatma, sister? Why, every morning he spins for two hours

40 immediately after his prayers. He says spinning is as purifying as praying.'

41 'Then, my son, I'll have a charka. But I can pay nothing for it.'

42 'You need pay nothing, sister. I tell you the Congress gives it free.'

43 Really, you mean it will cost me nothing. For, you see. I'm *so occupied at*

44 home, and may be I *could* never find time to spin...'

(From Kanthapura, by Raja Rao, 1974: 17-20)

Appendix IV

Sample IV

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.

(Excerpt from *The Patriot* by Nissim Ezekiel,

<<http://www.indiawrites.org/poetry/poetry.html>>

Last accessed 23rd, January, 2015)