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Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940** Vol. 17:5 May 2017
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Position of English in India: Three-way Categorization

Reza Omidvar, Doctoral Scholar in Linguistics

Dr. B. K. Ravindranath, Ph.D.

University of Mysore, India

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Abstract

The status of English in countries where it is spoken has been commonly described in a three-way categorization (i.e. English as a native language, English as a second language, and English as a foreign language). Although drawing a strong distinctive line between these settings has become increasingly difficult as a result of changes in the spread of language use and users, strength of the language, identification of the position of English in a given setting is deemed necessary as it affects language acquisition methods suggested by TESOL professionals. The answer to such inquiry is not usually straightforward. A number of models describing the spread of language use and users assign varied positions to English in India. The present study is to examine this position in light of the literature with sociolinguistic perspective. The authors also draw on the language models, the definitions provided for each category in the three-way categorization as well as the catch-all real-time function it plays in the given setting.

Key words: Three-way categorization, English as a second language, English as a foreign language, Three-circle model, non-native variety, language acculturation, language use models, language proficiency, language standardization

Introduction

The categorization of English varieties, which are spoken for internal, external, and international purposes (Kuo, 2006), gains significance when it comes to deciding about English instructional methods and our expectations from the learners in terms of pace and root of their systematic mistakes(i.e. frequently repeated even after receiving instructions). However, categorizing these non-native varieties usually tend to be complicated considering the reasons vary from one setting to another. This requires evaluating the language from sociolinguistic perspective and reasoning as spread of language-use domains in that society.

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That is, considerations regarding both the past and present status of the language in society should be made. This could lead to making decisions that matches with the context and our learners. Hence, making a decision about the status of English whose ownership has differently been claimed by the speakers in the global context deems necessary.

Historical Basis of English in India

Broadly speaking, general (e.g. internal, external, and international) purpose of English as a non-native variety in a given setting is the result of factors as emigration, colonization, and globalization (Kuo, 2006). In other words, the way English has emerged in a country partly determines the strength of and number of functions it plays. To this end, the way English was introduced to India obviously differs from that in China. Part of the functions that English plays in these settings can be influenced by these early driving forces, or the way English has emerged. For instance, English was introduced to India by the British Colonists while it gradually acculturated into multilingual, multicultural and pluralistic Indian context. The language started being used to meet the social, administrative, and educational needs in that context. While in China, English has sprung up mainly as the result of globalization and development of information technology in the past few decades.

Although the background of English in India language extends to the times before the arrival of British traders to the East Indies (The English project and the English language in India), it is widely known that English in India *de facto* started around 1600. The language has had an exponential growth in different ways ever since British traders set their feet on India; it soon began to compete with local languages. English became ‘the language of the Supreme Court in Calcutta’ in 1977 (Gupta, 1996: 189). Never did it take too long for English to be determined to be the language of higher education, law and administration. The development in the function of English in India has been associated to phases of institutionalization of English Bilingualism.

As such, Kachru (1983: 19) interpreted all these developments to three stages of ‘missionary’ ‘government policy’, and ‘diffusion’. The missionary phase is marked by the primary exploitation of English for education by Indian East Company. Government policies stage was associated with success of ‘Anglicist Group’ in getting the Minute (1835) approved. Kachru has also touted the expansion of English to higher education as: ‘diffusion’

stage, associating it with enforcement of a government policy which endorsed English the official and academic language of India in 1854. Likewise, Krishnaswamy and Krishnaswamy (2006) in another prominent interpretation divided such institutionalization process into five stages. First, ‘exploration’ began with the establishment of the British East India Company and the arrival of missionaries in India to educate Indians. Second, ‘consolidation’: In this stage, the English-competent Indians were assigned to offices and English was made the official language of education in 1873. Third, ‘dissemination’: English domains in India were expanded by opening a number of schools, colleges and universities pursuing the establishment of British government. Forth, ‘Identity’: English was linked with power, wealth, and social status. Krishnaswamy and Krishnaswamy also associated the more recent changes in the use of Indian English to development in Information Technology and called it ‘globalization’. The stages supposedly have resulted in developing variations in of English in India.

Non-native Varieties

Generally spoken, non-native varieties of English (e.g. Indian English) have been developed and termed differently (e.g. as *lingua franca*, Non-native institutionalized varieties of English, and so on). These are broadly categorized in a three-way categorization (i.e. English as first language, English as second language and English as foreign language). For instance, some authors posit that English in India is the *lingua franca* used for official and commercial purposes (Ramanathan, 2008) by people from different ‘intercultural background’ (Jenkins, 2009, p.9), or different ‘first language backgrounds’ (Seidlhofer, 2005, p.339) or ‘mother tongues’ (Meierkord, 2004, p. 111). Not only is English, hence, the most widely spoken language and *lingua franca*, it is but an acculturated language resulting from the contact of native English speakers with Indians who spoke their aboriginal languages, which later helped it spread and ever gain popularity. To that end, the language formed a distinct variety, which is ‘different from that spoken in other regions of the world’ (Baldrige, 2002), without blending with elements of other languages and creating a different language (e.g. creoles) not being understood by native English speakers in the inner circle; a distinct variety which differs in phonology, morphology, lexicon, and syntax (Jason Baldrige).

A standard non-native variety of English, spoken by educated Indian bilinguals, gradually developed in India. The variety is now intelligible both to other non-native English

speakers in India and to native speakers of English. The standardization by no means rules out sub-varieties of English spoken across the vast land; there are varieties of the language that is in some way tilted with existing local languages in a given geographical region. However, what is known as a standard version of Indian English is a variety of English accepted and intelligible by both native and non-native English speakers. Source book as “Indian- Oxford Advanced learner's Dictionary for Learners” is an indication of such standardization which is suggested for pedagogical purposes. Such varieties of English are in conformity with what is acceptable in the English of native speakers in terms of vocabulary and morphosyntax. The most important difference may be the manner that Indians express the meaning in their native languages. In other words, the same expression is expressed with varied forms. However, admitting the fact that English has undergone many changes under the linguistic influence of aboriginal Indian languages spoken, Krishnaswamy and Krishnaswamy (2006) stated that “the status of English in India is unique”. They asserted that “English of Indians is neither a foreign language nor a second language nor a dialect of English- it is a module, a ‘lect’ that words as a module.” As such, they maintained that the widespread use of English and the enormous number of Indians using it, roughly estimated as many as 350 million Indians, has resulted in a distinct variety that may be called ‘Indian English. (2006, p. 143).

Indian English and Definitions of EFL and ESL

The position of Indian English in the three-way categorization could also be studied with reference to definitions presented by authors for each category. According to the mainstream perceptions of the notions of a second language and a foreign language presented by some linguistics, the second language is known as a language taught to immigrants to a country where it is the first language of its natives. In other words L2 learners acquire the language to meet their communicative needs in interaction with L2 native speakers; second language learning (ESL) is known as learning a language where it is in use. However, English as a second language has not necessarily been limited to situations where it is commonly used in the environment of the learners. India is a flagrant example in which English plays multiple roles for the speakers of that country and the overall proficiency and familiarity of the people is far more than those in countries where English is a foreign language by no doubt (e.g., Iran, China, etc.). Nonetheless, owing to the prevalence of numerous aboriginal languages and vernaculars, which have been spoken in India for centuries, and their influence on English, many may be reluctant to categorize English in

India as a second language, defined differently by some other authors. The online Free Dictionary defines the second language as ‘a non-native language officially recognized and adopted in a multilingual country as a means of public communication’. Similarly, Yardi (1977) defines English as a ‘second language’ with reference to a situation where English is widely used for purposes of administration, education, and a common link-language. He further defines English as a ‘foreign language’ where the language is taught for certain specific purposes, such as reading scientific works, translation, communication at certain levels and for certain purposes only. Likewise, Crystal (2012) defined English in India as a second language in his terminology.

Indian English and Language Spread Models

The other part of the literature, which could be consulted to ascertain the position of Indian English in such categorization, is the models describing the spread and use of English (e.g. Strevens, 1992; Kachru, 1992; Gollach, 1987; McArthur, 1987). The authors described the spread of non-native varieties of English in a various ways. Strevens described them in an upside-down tree diagram while they gain other positions in circle models presented by McArthur (1987), Gollach (1988) and Kachru (1992). According to McArthur (1998) Circle Model, Indian English is just a sub-variety of English, distinguished from regional varieties as American Standard English, British and Irish Standard English and South Asian Standard English. The sub- varieties and regional or standard varieties form a Circle of World English. One prominent model is Kachru’s (1992) “three concentric model” which ascertains the spread and functional domains of English in these circles. The model takes geographical and genetic view to describe the varieties. Accordingly Kachru (1992; 356), for instance, categorized countries using the English language into three groups, namely as “Inner Circle”, “Outer Circle” and “Expanding Circle”. Accordingly, countries where English is the mother tongue or dominant language (i.e. native or first language) of the country belongs in Inner Circle (e.g. Australia, New Zealand, United States, Britain), while the Outer Circle comprises former British colonies where the language gained the position of the countries’ chief institutions, and plays an important "second language" role in a multilingual setting (e.g. India, Singapore, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Malaysia, Philippines, and Sri Lanka). For these countries English is an International language, a variety developed in diverse socio-cultural contexts referred to as: “World Englishes” by Kachru.

Two-Dimensional Growth of English in India

Identifying the position of Indian English as a non-native variety could also be explained from other facets as the two-dimensional growth of English in the multilingual and multicultural context of India. Observing the trend, it can be found out that English has increasingly become popular in Indian, and the widespread use of the language has turned its status from what was traditionally regarded as “library language”, the language used only for scientific fields and mostly, if not always, in written form. The growth is regarded to be two-folds. The first dimension of this change is related to “depth” of such expansion showing an increase in the language use domains in India. The language which was initially started as a means of instruction at higher education in a very limited scope, is now used not only as a medium of instruction but also for communication and correspondence in parliament, the law courts, broadcasting, the press, and the education system, for unifying people all across the country, and people’s daily life. This functional expansion has moved its position from a “library language” to a language widely spoken in the Indian sociocultural context. Nonetheless, the better quality of English instruction and ever increasing use of English as a medium of instruction in schools have augmented English knowledge of current generations. For instance, Rao (2008) stated that the number of languages used as media of instruction has dropped from 60 to 47 languages. Second, “breadth” of Indian English use concerns with the increase in the number of speakers. The last survey of India Today in 1997 suggested that one third of the population could manage a conversation in English. On the other hand, India has a projected population of 1.3 billion (United Nations World Population Prospect, 2015) at present; the number of Indians who know English has hitherto skyrocketed to at least 350 million, which fairly equals the population of native English speakers in the US and the UK, combined. Considering above premises, the status of English language has increasingly empowered in the land of religion, dance and cricket. As such, it is now being learned and spoken as a second language by Indians, and is regarded as ‘a 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’(Crystal, 2004). The functional expansion of the language along with the functions named in the definitions of second language (e.g. Yardi, 1977, Crystal, 2012) could also lead us to determining its actual status. As such, the aforementioned functions and terms (e.g. a linking language, a medium of instruction) do not contradict with the position of English as a second language in the three-way categorization.

English Proficiency

The other significant factor that can be evidenced for distinguishing English as a second language from English as a foreign language in the three-way categorization is the language proficiency. Although some authors assert that the line between a foreign and second language has blurred in terms of proficiency, there are some marked differences between the language knowledge of people speaking English as a second language and that of those exploiting it as a foreign language. Chances are speakers of a language as a foreign language may also be highly proficient in English, yet the language proficiency of general public in that setting is markedly low. Many of the people at large may not be able to speak a word in English, whereas most regular people at all levels of education possess degrees of the language abilities indicating bilingualism in a country where it is spoken as a second language. It is also noteworthy that the difference between English knowledge of the people in these two settings depends, to a great extent, upon the language policies implemented and the quality of English education offered. For instance, India adopted 'three language formula' policy in which the instruction of English has not been limited to being as just a subject; it rather plays the great role medium of instruction in many schools. As such, Hindi and English, the official and associate official languages, must be studied as two of the three languages (Saini, 2000; cited in Ramanathan, 2008). English in private schools is often instructed both as a subject and a first language or a medium of instruction from Standard 1, whereas English in aided and public schools is usually taught from Standard 5 as a second or a third language. According to Ramanathan (2008) English is the first language for 85% of secondary school students who go to private schools. Furthermore, instruction of English in public and aided schools begins at a young age when the students are still in their childhood and can benefit from neural plasticity of the brain and attain relatively high English proficiency. All above factors have results in an all-in increase in language proficiency.

In this regard, some authors evaluated Indians' English proficiency and classified it as 'inadequate' (Daswani, 1974), which corresponds to Kachru's minimal point. However, Kachru (1983) have evaluated this proficiency as midpoint with reference to the 'cline of bilingualism' consisting of three arbitrary points: ambilingual, the central point, and the zero point. The 'zero' point, or the lowest level, demonstrates the language ability of people who are almost monolingual and have negligible language competency, whereas the highest point shows the near-native language abilities (Kachru, 1986). Moreover, more current

observations of the Indian English speakers, from all walks of life and social classes, in terms of English proficiency and spread of language use domains in India could suggest a more solid position in every aspect. As such, English language ability of general public in India is thus in conformity with the second language position assigned to Indian English in Kachru's language model, and definitions of second language and foreign language.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the functions that English plays in Indian context including academia, government administration, linking people and the states in governmental affairs, heralding unity in the whole country and a means of communication between people. Increasing roles that English language plays in India has helped deeply integrate it to their daily life communication. Moreover, English knowledge of people resulted from historical background, language policy and growing interest of people in English has made it different from that in many other countries in the "Outer Circle". The status can be more disentangled once one comes to realize the estimated number of speakers of English as a second language outnumbers its speakers as the first language.

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Reza Omidvar, Doctoral Scholar in Linguistics
 Department of Studies in Linguistics
 University of Mysore
 Mysore 570006
 Karnataka
 India
reza.omidvar.research@gmail.com

Dr. B.K. Ravindranath, PhD.
 Assistant Professor
 BOS in Linguistics
 Department of Studies in Linguistics

University of Mysore
Mysore 570006
Karnataka
India
ravindranath@kiks.uni-mysore.ac.in