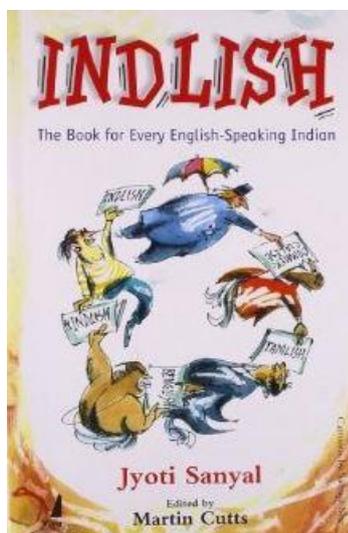


Exploring Indian English: Distinctive or Just Dysfunctional?

Indian English - that strange amalgam of British English, Hindi influences, colorful local idioms, and grammatical missteps - is frequently the subject of derision. This criticism notwithstanding, some reports suggest that there are now more English speakers on the Indian subcontinent than anywhere else in the world. And with India being such an important hub for a wide range of business outsourcing activities, what impact will the widespread use of Indian English have on these activities? In this exclusive conversation with Jyoti Sanyal, author of [Indlish - The Book for Every English-Speaking Indian](#), we examine the unique causes, characteristics and consequences of Indian English.



WriteGroove: Your book describes the negative influence that Victorian English and the British East India Company have had on English writing in India. As an American to an Indian, why can't we just blame the Brits for the state of English writing in India, and be done with it?!

Jyoti Sanyal: I don't know about blaming the Brits, because that was the kind of language that was written during Victorian times. But the people who came to India for the East India Company had very little education. And the clerks or "writers" of the Company were such bad writers that the directors gave them ready-made formats for letters, because they were not entrusted with writing anything. As soon as they could, they recruited Indian clerks to do all the copying because they didn't like the idea of doing a clerk's work.

WG: So the Company employees were not well educated, and neither were those they recruited?

JS: Right. Whenever one culture bumps into another, a "pidgin" language begins to grow. The clerks of the East India Company coined "pidgin English" terms. And the trouble is that this pidgin has survived, for example in phrases like "On Sunday I went to my *native*." The clerks invented this business of "*native place*," and "*dwelling place*," which no Englishman ever used. I wouldn't say it's the influence of the Brits, but I would say the pidgin English that evolved at that early stage keeps popping up everywhere.

WG: Americans never took to the formal, stuffy quality of Victorian English. Why have so many Indians clung to it, especially in their writing?

JS: When the East India Company began operating in India, it was rather hostile to the idea of the natives getting educated. They did not want the natives to catch on to what they were up to, which was ... exploiting the natives! So initially, they took no interest in education for the natives. Only after the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857 did the British government invest in English education in India, and this coincided with the heyday of Victorian English. So the neo-literate Indians got an overdose of Victorian English.

WG: Still, that was nearly 150 years ago. Why have they clung to it so fiercely?

JS: The Indian universities haven't changed their syllabi. Calcutta University still prescribes nothing but the same old Victorian authors. When these universities were established, Victorian authors were still writing! Today, most universities are ignorant of so many writers that have written since then. In a country where "grey hair rules over grey matter," the older generation will always rule. And the

older generation went on foisting Victorian English. Indians should be reading writers from the third world, because we will find a resonance with those places. Calcutta University still hasn't touched the Nigerian Nobel winners, such as Ole Soyinka or Chinua Achebe, or the Egyptian Nobel winner, Naguib Mahfouz. I have sounded university authorities. But they are all smug and comfy in their jobs, and want to do nothing.

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WG: There was a time when there was no American English, because there was no America. Now American English has been accepted as a legitimate form of English. Should Indian English be viewed as another of the many proper types of English, since some reports say there are more English speakers in India than anywhere else?

JS: That's not true. What silly person said this?

WG: We've seen it cited in several reports. It probably depends on how you define "English-speaking."

JS: Right. It does depend on what you mean by "English-speaking."

WG: OK, well, leaving these reports aside, should we consider Indian English a proper English in the same way we say American English is one variant, British English is another, and so on?

JS: Certainly not! You can't really compare America and India, because many Americans were descendants of Englishmen. Their mother tongue was English. While English naturally grew in

America, English never did naturally grow here in India. The people who speak English in India today represent an insignificant minority.

WG: So it's the small percentage of Indians who speak English that prevents us from thinking about Indian English as its own legitimate form?

“The parent company in the US would review what the writers in Bangalore wrote. They were very dissatisfied - faults in grammar, passive voice, etc. So they pressured the managers to do something about it.”

JS: Those who call for that kind of recognition do so because of the Indian writers who have made it big in the English-speaking world. Also, some say "English has been in India for three centuries, and so it is as much an Indian language as any other language." There is some sense in that, I think. But what kind of English has been here?

WG: If we did agree that Indian English deserves to be one of the "Englishes," then are we legitimizing poor grammar with expressions like "very less" and "today itself," and are we giving tacit approval to all the writing pitfalls you address in your book?

JS: Yes, exactly. The trouble with this vocal minority (who seek recognition for Indian English) is that they are very insular and think only of their little circle. Each wants to draw attention to himself and say: "Look, I write good English." But that's not how the whole of India writes it.

WG: Maybe in some idyllic future, all the grammar and other problems will be fixed, and you'll agree that we should consider Indian English a proper form of English?

JS: I doubt that will happen. There are some Indian authors, Salman Rushdie for instance, who have created caricatures: Indian characters that speak a funny sort of English. This patronizing attitude may create entertaining literature. But the characters are often not very Indian at all, but a creation of somebody's imagination. More than grammar, the big problem for non-native speakers is that we cannot keep track of changing idiom. Established idiom is what matters most.

WG: But aren't the idioms in British English different than those of American English?

JS: Yes. There's a story about a UN resolution that both the American and British teams agreed on, and the Americans could not understand why the Brits wanted to "table" the resolution if they approved of it.

WG: Because "table" in America means to postpone, whereas in the UK it means to propose or introduce?

JS: Yes. The Americans asked, "Why are you *tabling* it if you think it's a good resolution?" The Brits said, "That's exactly why we want to *table* it." Finally, someone figured out it was a case of misunderstood idiom.

WG: It sounds like the "Who's on First" Abbott and Costello comedy routine, where they go back and forth trying to identify baseball team members who have names like "Who," "What," and "I Don't Know." Utter confusion.

JS: The Indian speaker translates the idiom of Indian languages into English, and the result is nonsensical. You can't translate idiom. This is where I think Indian English will always have its limitation. Unless they keep in touch with the language as it's being spoken in English-speaking countries, they will be using unidiomatic English.

WG: With so much business outsourcing coming to India from the West, one would imagine that the quality of written English would have improved to meet Western clients' expectations. Has it?

JS: Call centers in India are training Indians to imitate an American drawl, and pretend they're native speakers. The trouble is that they're given a drawl, but they speak the same content. What is this absurd notion to give speech training without proper linguistic content?

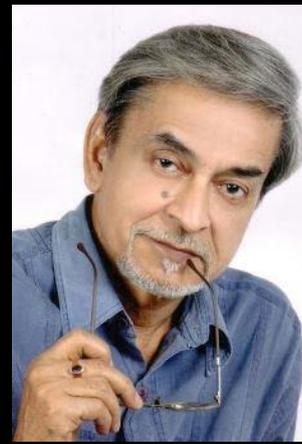
WG: What one says is more important than how one says it. Let's talk about written English. Outsourcing has traditionally involved call center work, medical transcription, etc. Now Indians are doing financial research, analyst reports and legal briefs. Will the written English be up to the mark?

JS: The corporates in India will act only when under pressure. For instance, I used to coach technical writers at Tektronix. The parent company in the US would review what the writers in Bangalore wrote. And they were very dissatisfied - faults in grammar, passive voice, etc. They pressured the managers to do something about it, which is why I was asked to help. You're right about legal work coming to India. But that's easy, because American lawyers also use the kind of archaic English that is common in India!

WG: Yes, that's certainly true to some extent.

JS: It's only very recently that a move is being made for plain language in law in several countries, including Australia and the UK. Here in India, I have begun work on "Citizens' Summaries" of laws. These are plain English versions of laws that people here would want to clearly understand.

WG: One of the things you do not focus on in *Indlish* is whether less formal written communication like email, SMS and instant



Jyoti Sanyal

Jyoti Sanyal was an Indian educator, journalist and long-time Assistant Editor of The Statesman, one of India's oldest English language newspapers. An ardent supporter of the Plain English movement, he was a founder of Clear English India, and dean of the Asian College of Journalism. Sadly, Sanyal passed away unexpectedly not long after this interview was conducted.

messaging have influenced people's writing. In light of India's youth culture and emergence as the world's technical support capital, has the writing here become casual or sloppy because of these things?

JS: The other day, I replied to someone who emailed me asking for some help with English. He used the letter "u" for "you," "ur" for "your" and so on. Plus running sentences, no punctuation, etc. I wrote back saying, "Decide whether you are sending an SMS or writing a letter. Your writing shows you couldn't even bother to use full sentences, so why should I bother to reply?"

WG: We've had people who apply for writing jobs in our Indian office, and they do the same thing.

JS: But the real problem with Indians writing in English is that their writing isn't colloquial and smooth-flowing. I ask my

students whether they try to sound pompous when using their mother tongue. They say no, but cannot explain why they use English in a stilted way. Part of the problem is the dreary books they read at school - and they're not hearing English enough. CNN and BBC have made it possible for them to hear native English speakers; they've got to HEAR native speakers.

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WG: In contrast to both the UK and US, which are largely monolingual, India is incredibly multilingual. If so many people in India are speaking two, three or more languages, what explains the poor quality of written and spoken English in the country?

JS: When I speak to audiences about English, I tell them that we Indians are the only people in this entire world who are multilingual to such a large extent, and who have been multilingual for centuries. What's important is to understand how one language behaves in contrast to your mother tongue. In [Indlish](#), I have shown where English behaves unlike Indian languages. That is the gist of my method of teaching English to Indians. But of course, to learn a language you've got to hear it.

WG: And it helps to hear it when you're young, given children's ability to pick up languages early.

JS: Yes, but even if you hear it later you will pick it up. During my time in Bangalore, I wanted to learn Kannada, but no one wanted to teach me. Finally,

someone told me "No, you will not learn Kannada." When I asked why not, he said "You're the Dean of the Asian College of Journalism. In your position, people who come to you will speak English. And so you'll never learn Kannada." He was right. Because I didn't hear it around me, I didn't learn it.

WG: You've said that Indian-language writing is often rich and eloquent compared to English writing in India. Yet this is lost on most foreigners, who usually don't know Indian languages. Is there a tendency among foreigners to judge Indians based on how well they know English, irrespective of the other languages they may know quite well?

JS: Yes. You're absolutely right. Pardon me for saying this, but to the ordinary American, the world is America, and they do judge Indians by the way they speak English. Americans have always been for a more informal language. But official American English has become terribly pompous. They're inventing all sorts of euphemisms. For instance, there are no more hospitals in the US; there are only "*wellness centers*." And a patient at a *wellness center* never dies. He "*undergoes a negative patient care outcome*."

WG: That sounds more like an insurance company expression.

JS: It's the new medical lingo. And at the Pentagon, they are always inventing misleading phrases to hide what they're doing.

WG: That's definitely true! As publishing professionals working in English in India, we have seen our fair share of poor writing. What is the role of the Indian educational system in this?

JS: It's all related to education. English instruction in India relies on the grammar-translation method of teaching English,

which was discredited in the 1880's. Teachers in vernacular-medium schools know only this method. They don't know English well enough to write it. Teachers must be given a new orientation. I've proposed a method that explains how English behaves unlike Indian languages. I met the Directorate of Public Instruction, but got nowhere. I gave my suggestions to Calcutta University's Pro-Vice Chancellor. He said he'd get back to me ... and that was the end of it.

WG: Your book has an element of despair and frustration that comes through, and I can tell that you've lived with these issues for a long time.

JS: I was a sub-editor, and I was very frustrated! I'd have to plead guilty if you say you can feel my rage between the lines.

WG: And we have been frustrated too, in terms of the difficulties we've faced in finding and promoting quality writing

here. So what is the hope for the future of English writing in India?

JS: I suppose there is a fringe area of hope, because some Indians writing in English have made it big. Also, I see more Indian boys and girls becoming bloggers, expressing themselves in new ways. Hopefully this will inspire other young people to do the same. My daughter is a great blogger; she writes beautiful prose and poetry. But remember that this is happening in a country of 1.3 billion people. Among the huge majority, the absorption of English words now includes newly-coined "Hinglish" words (words and expressions that combine Hindi and English). So before they absorb the right thing, they are already coining perversions! I still don't know why Indians become pompous when they use English. Indians are not pompous when using their mother tongue. Why do they think that to write in English you must use big words? Outsiders ask "Why do Indians do this?" I don't know...I wish I knew. **wg**

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