Unveiling the Veil : An Analysis of Linguistic Competence v/s Linguistic Performance of the General Variety of English in India Today - The Quest for a Paradigmatic Model

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Abstract

This paper explores the new form of English that is frequently used by the youth in India today that may be termed as General Variety of English. GVE is a perfect amalgamation of Hinglish, SMS, Email language and other popular jargonisms. People use this new form in day to day communication but without any prescriptive grammar, thereby leading to semantic gaps between encoder and decoder at times.

This new variety has percolated into every field, from literature to journalism to ordinary speech. This new variety experiments with grammatical variations with tenses often mixed, auxiliary verbs missing from sentences and vowels missing from words. SMS and Email language have become modes of linguistic behavior in India. The youth have informally created a structure and grammar for SMS and Email shorthand which at times trespasses into multiple meanings thereby creating ambiguities. This paper addresses the need to become linguistically competent in the linguistic performance of GVE so that there is reduced communication gap.

Keywords : General Variety of English, Hinglish, SMS language, Email Shorthand, Linguistic Performance, Communicative Performance and Linguistic Competence.
India is a multilingual nation. Given the history of its slavery for more than two centuries, the language of its colonial masters has made inroads into its cultural existence. Often English has acted as a bridge of communication between two states speaking different regional languages. But since independence, from time to time some have lobbied to declare Hindi as the national language as it could act as the cultural bridge between different states having the same colonial history and bring the nation closer to its roots but mass resistance has led it to be declared only as the official language along with English being the other. Every nation has a national language and the national language brings nation closer to its integral essence and marks individual existence for the countries. But India has never taken pains to change its imperial mindset. Hence, at times, India is looked down upon by others as being cultural slaves of English. No doubt, English acts as the global bridge to the world, but importance of Hindi as our inherently easier tool for communication cannot be undermined as all the regional languages are sister languages of Hindi, having the same roots in Sanskrit. The result is emergence of new variety of language in India that is the mix-up of Hindi and English, which can be called 'Hinglish'.

Indians invariably use English words often in their day-to-day discourse. They use English as a communicative tool as well. But the question is how much are they linguistically competent in English? Indian varieties of English have always boasted of being grammatically perfect and purest forms of Queen's English since the colonial times. The reason is that the Indians used to learn the nuances of language since childhood. There has never been a gap between the linguistic competence and linguistic performance of English amongst Indians. But the past few decades have seen a new found importance being given to regional languages, especially Hindi, as if, suddenly, we have realized ourselves to be Indians. Hence today, in India a new variety of English is being spoken that has been coloured by the native languages and sociological norms. This new Variety of English can be called 'THE GENERAL VARIETY OF ENGLISH' which is completely sans real grammar rules. In this variety tenses are mixed, auxiliary verbs have lost importance and vowels are becoming appendix in language. Hinglish is just one component of this new form. Many other communicative tool patterns mix together to create the GVE.

One needs to understand the structure of this new emerging variety before estimating the gap between the linguistic performance and competence of the same. Given the present Indian scenario of communication techniques and usage, nobody can deny that our country has witnessed a great linguistic convergence leading to certain phonological and syntactic adjustments, on the part of both - English as well as the Indian languages. Hence, English has been Indianized while there has been 'Englishization' of Indian languages. Thus the general discourse in India today includes mixed codes of usage from English and other regional languages or Hindi in its language matrix. This percolation of English words is not limited only into the educated or semi-educated society, but even rustics and illiterates generally use common English words in their daily verbal interaction - *Time Kya ho raha hai*, being one of the most common sentences uttered in India at some place or the other. The Indianization of English language has led to the emergence of a variety of English albeit non-native and lexically, morphologically, syntactically and stylistically different from the standard forms of English. This variety has come to be known as 'Indian Variety of English (IVE). Thus words like 'dhoti', 'Harijan', 'Namaskar' are generally used in their native structure, even in literature of Indian Writing in English. Similarly, some Indian affixes have gone
into derivation of an entirely new IVE vocabulary. For example, *wallah, Ji, sahib* are class maintaining derivational suffixes:

- Rickshaw + wallah - Rickshaw wallah
- Master + Ji - Masterji
- Major + Sahib - Major sahib

Similarly, the grammatical structure has also undergone massive transformation, not only in ordinary interaction but also in the literary output. People would speak 'I'm working in this city for five years', whereas writers would pen down -

'I am living far off in Borivli' (The Railway Clerk). The literary artists have also shown Englishization of Indian proverbs e.g.

a) 'You can not straighten a dog's tail' (Kanthapura)
b) 'Through their fingers money goes pouring like water' (Kanthapura)

In the post colonial era, some writers out rightly reject the idea of translating regional words as they may lose integral essence. Thus, we have Amitav Ghosh using bangla term 'adda' very often in 'The Shadow Lines' and Rushdie not translating 'purdah' into veil in his novels. This experimentation is not restricted to the literature, and but is more often done by 'The AAM AADMI'.

This Indian variety of English in India has given rise to a very new conception of English language, which man has tried to formulate according to his need of the communication pattern. Thus, if the rural Indians have Englishized their dialects then urban youth have tried to fashion a suitable mode of communication in English adapting the language to the technological advancements. With the mobiles becoming a necessity with the youth, the short messaging system has become unique form of communication. Spellings, grammar and all other syntactical formalities have been replaced by the convenient coding of language. Thus 'this' has become 'dis'; 'for' - 4; 'to'-2; 'inform' 'infrm', even 'message' has become 'msg'. Actually, the language has totally succumbed to the pressure of saving time in this busy world. A totally new SMS language has come up which has completely transformed the linguistic behaviour of India. Some of the common changes that SMS has brought, can be seen everywhere, for example

- Of - f
- You - u
- Your - ur
- That - dat
- From - frm
- See - c
- Extreme - xfrm
- We - v
- Is - s
--and the list can go on and on. Thus, a highly educated person who has great linguistic competence in English also finds himself puzzled when he reads SMS on his mobile sans the essential vowels like 'Gd Mng' or By n cyaa.'

This is not the only astonishing change that language has adapted according to the needs of the hi-tech society. With the computers becoming an essential part of our lives, its communicative mode has become our language behaviour, and its technical vocabulary has intruded into our colloquial language in such a manner that today we delete anything instead of removing. This technicality of society has given rise to jargonism in our ordinary linguistic discourse. Today jargon exists everywhere, though it doesn't actually have any negative connotation. Jargon is the special or technical language of a trade, profession or similar group. But now the respective technical language of every profession has percolated into ordinary chat. Gone are the days when we used to talk to people, now we dialogue with people over a cup of coffee or participate in a heated debate on the commoditization of services. Today we pen down our thoughts in diary instead of simply writing or just table our views in front of friends. Computers have greatly contributed in initiating this new mode of language behaviour. In our normal discourse, we keep up with the tradition of cut-copy-paste. Journalism also has seen this adaptive capability of a literary language like English, and we often come across statements like 'It is a good read in the best article reviews'. This kind of English that is spoken in the urban India can be termed as the general variety of English. Though there is great difference in the habitual make-up of urban India and rural India, but somewhere they meet and that is in the usage of Hinglish, which is the result of the intrusion of local dialects into English and the invasion of English into the local languages and Hindi. Urban as well as rural youth have done some code-matching and code-fixing in their oral communication, hence giving rise to the emergence of Hinglish as the most popular linguistic behaviour.

This structure of the 'General Variety of English in India' has a wide gap between its linguistic performance and its competence as everyone uses according to ones will, with no prescriptive grammar or rules associated to it. This new variety has led the youth to achieve communicative competence in English, but not linguistic competence. Today India is also facing the same problem of a large gap between performance and competence, whether it is about Hindi language or English.

Linguistic competence means the ability to speak and write grammatically correct language while performance is related to our day-to-day speech mechanism. A rickshaw puller or any uneducated Indian would ask 'tem' kay hua instead of time. This is the linguistic performance. In the same manner, a well-read, educated Indian would continue to mix-up tenses in his English. Thus linguistic performance is far-removed from linguistic competence. The correct knowledge of language has to be imbibed in the learning process of a child. Even SMS and Email languages have formed their own rules which define its linguistic competence. For example, here is a list of SMS and Email abbreviations suggested at VETA Communicative English Learning Centres across India:

**SMS Language**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How Are you?</th>
<th>– ?RU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>See You At Nine</td>
<td>– CU@9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great</td>
<td>– gr8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Come On</td>
<td>– C'mon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Because – Bcoz
Please – pls/plz

**E-mail short hand**
All My Best Wishes – AMBW
As Soon As possible – ASAP
Before – B4
By The Way – BTW
Keep In Touch – KIT
For Your Information – FYI

Any deviation from the rules of linguistic competence in SMS and email shorthand would result in incorrect communication.

Hence there is a dire need to look into integrating linguistic competence of this 'GVE', i.e. 'General Variety of English' with its daily performance so that there is no gap between 'Linguistic Competence' and 'Linguistic Performance'; otherwise this new form of language would remain hieroglyphics for many.

Language is inherently present in our mind since childhood. A child internalizes language and its rules through social environment. This mental proficiency is governed by the descriptive grammar-the rules that govern what people do or can say. This also determines his linguistic proficiency of communicative competence. But prescriptive rules of grammar, i.e. those rules which prescribe what people should/shouldn't say define linguistic competence. Traditionally established forms of English prescribe that a sentence should not end with preposition or should not use double negatives. Descriptive rules are natural, followed intuitively and are learnt at primary level. Prescriptive rules are not natural and need to be learned.

Linguistic competence is defined as the ability of a speaker-hearer to speak and understand language in a grammatically correct manner. It is one of the two elements in the great linguist and renowned mathematician Noam Chomsky's performance /competence distinction. Linguistic competence is an area of study in the field of intercultural communication that has been founded by him. Linguistic competence is the use of grammatical rules of a language, whereas communicative competence is the use of social language conventions. This broader knowledge to communicate successfully within the norms of a culture's language has been introduced by the linguist Dell Hymes who has expanded on Noam Chomsky's view of linguistic competence by considering the social factors of a culture's language. Chomsky feels that people cannot successfully practice being linguistically competent due to what he calls “distractions” like the social norms. The interference from social norms in communication forces the speaker to develop communication competence. Although someone who is speaking in a linguistically competent manner may use perfect grammar, a communicatively competent speaker would take into consideration the appropriateness of the situation. Analyzing how the people in a culture use linguistic competence to communicate can determine the rules of the language in context. Chomskyan linguistics has introduced the concept of transformational grammar, wherein he feels utterances (sequences of words) to have a syntax which can be characterized by a formal grammar; in particular, a context free grammar with transformational rules.

It has been hypothesized by him that children have an innate knowledge of the basic grammatical structure common to all human languages. This innate knowledge is often referred to as universal
grammar. It is argued that modeling knowledge of language using a formal grammar accounts for the "productivity" of language: with a limited set of grammar rules and a finite set of terms, humans are able to produce an infinite number of sentences, including sentences no one has previously said. He has always acknowledged his debt to Panini for his modern notion of an explicit generative grammar.

In India this knowledge of universal grammar has led to the discovery of 'The General Variety of English' that has Hinglish, SMS, jargonism, new email format as the new forms. The interference of the social norms of global culture and technological experimentations have provided a more conducive environment for its emergence.

The modern youth in India have invariably adapted his language to the new format. Their linguistic performance has been coloured by their skills in communicative performance. But with the lack of prescriptive rules for its usage, it leads to a semantic gap in communication many a times. Moreover no one can be said to be linguistically competent in this new form of English. If there is no distinction between encoded and decoded language, the user would be deemed competent; but then it depends upon many other situations.

The transcription of 'th' would be understood as 'Thita' by a mathematics student unless he knows transcription symbols. Similarly b/w might be deciphered as 'between' by some and 'black and white' by many who are not competent in this new language. 'S' may be 'is' or 'as' in SMS language depending upon its context of usage in the sentence. ASAP might be 'as soon as possible' for technocrats who have made it a norm in email language, but teachers could have made it the short form of 'all students are present'. Moreover 'btw' means 'by the way' technically in email shorthand and it is the accepted acronym in business communication in email language, while on the other hand it is often used as 'between' in SMS language as well thereby leading to confusion in communication. These are the technicalities of this new language which need to be addressed today. There is no denying that this new 'General Variety of English' has come to stay, but to bridge the gap between its linguistic competence and linguistic performance is essential today. Linguists in India have to come forward and generate a new form of Grammar that can add credence to this new English of Young India.

References