

Subcontinent raises its voice

With an English-speaking population now likely to have surpassed that of Britain and the US, India, with its dynamic variety of English, is set to become a linguistic superpower, argues **David Crystal**

India currently has a special place in the English language record books — as the country with the largest English-speaking population in the world. Ten years ago that record was held by the US. Not any more.

The population of India passed a billion a couple of years ago, and is increasing at the rate of 3% per annum. In 1997 an India Today survey suggested that about a third of the population had the ability to carry on a conversation in English. This was an amazing increase over the estimates of the 1980s, when only about 4%-5% of the population were thought to use the language. And given the steady increase in English learning since 1997 in schools and among the upwardly mobile, we must today be talking about at least 350 million. This is more than the combined English-speaking populations of Britain and the US.

All of these speakers — bar a *lakh* (hundred thousand) or so — have learned English as a second language. English has special regional status in India, and is an important unifying medium between the Indo-European north and the Dravidian south. Special status means much more than having a place in the public institutions of the country — in parliament, the law courts, broadcasting, the press, and the education

system. It means that the language permeates daily life. You cannot avoid it, especially in the cities.

My wife and I have just returned from a two-week lecturing tour of India, sponsored by the British Council. We visited Chennai, Delhi, Kolkata, Pune and Mumbai, and found ourselves surrounded by English everywhere. The roads into the city centres from the airports would pass through some very poor areas, but even the smallest shops and stalls would have an English sign or poster nearby.

Outside the Red Fort in Delhi, a Hindi-speaking teacher was marshalling a class of 30 Hindi-speaking teenagers, and giving them instructions about where to meet and when their bus would leave — in English. Outside St Thomas' Cathedral in Chennai we met a group of primary-school Tamil children coming out of the local school. As soon as they saw us they waved excitedly — we were the only fair-skinned people to be seen — and we received a chorus of

Many people still see British English as the only 'proper' English

"hello", "hi", "how are you?" ... "Fine thanks, how are you?" we replied. "We're fine too," they said. Seven-year-olds, we marvelled, on a confident career-track towards English.

Towards Indian English, of course. India has had a longer exposure to English than any other country that uses it as a second language, and its distinctive words, idioms, grammar, rhetoric and rhythms are numerous and pervasive. Don't confuse Indian English with what is sometimes called "Hinglish" — a vague phrase that can refer to a use of English containing occasional Hindi words or to a much more fundamental mixing of the two languages, unintelligible to a monolingual English speaker, and heard daily on FM radio. Indian English is a much broader notion, applicable to the whole of India, including those regions where other languages are used. There we find Punglish (Punjabi), Tamlish (Tamil), and many more.

Collections of Indian English vocabulary have been around for more than a century. *Hobson-Jobson* was the first, published in 1886. It is largely of historical interest now, and there have been attempts to supercede it, such as *Hanklin-Janklin* (compiled by Nigel Hanklin, Banyan Books, 2004). But no dictionary has yet catalogued the extraordinary

stylistic range and regional diversity of Indian English. We encountered hundreds of distinctive usages on our travels, such as pre-owned cars (used cars), near and dear numbers (for phoning friends and family) and kitchen platform (work-surface). Words are broken in different ways. Outside the University in Mumbai is the greeting "wel-come". A roadside warning reads "land slide prone area". Another says "over-size vehicles keep left".

The historical background of India is never far away from everyday usage. "What do you think you're doing? Cutting grass?" says a boss to a worker lazing about. How can cutting grass be equivalent to doing nothing? Because grass-cutting was done by servants. But this history also promotes correspondences. In particular there is a remarkable sharing of linguistic humour between India and Britain. Both countries have the same penchant for word-play. "Austensibly, it's about Jane" reads a review headline about a critical book on that author. "Be Ecofriendly" says a sign in Delhi — but it spells the second word "Ecofriendelhi".

Indian English is changing. Regional dialects of Indian English are increasingly apparent — an inevitable consequence of this huge country's cultural and linguistic

diversity. There are noticeable differences of accent and dialect, especially between north and south. On the ad billboards, and in Bollywood film posters, there are now Hindi slogans written in the roman alphabet. You can see change in the newspapers too — in the matrimonial columns, for instance, where families advertise for desirable brides or grooms. A generation ago these were full of such terms as "wheatish". Today these have largely gone, and we find such criteria as "professionally qualified" instead — a linguistic reflection of an important social change.

Three generations after independence, Indian English is still having trouble distancing itself from the weight of its British English past. Many people still think of Indian English as inferior, and see British English as the only "proper" English. It is an impression still fostered by the language examining boards that dominate teachers' mindsets. At the same time a fresh confidence is plainly emerging among young people, and it is only a matter of time before attitudes change.

It could hardly be otherwise when we consider the way Indian writing is increasingly reflecting indigenous varieties. Gone are the days when everyone in a novel, from sahib to servant, spoke standard **Page 2 ▶**

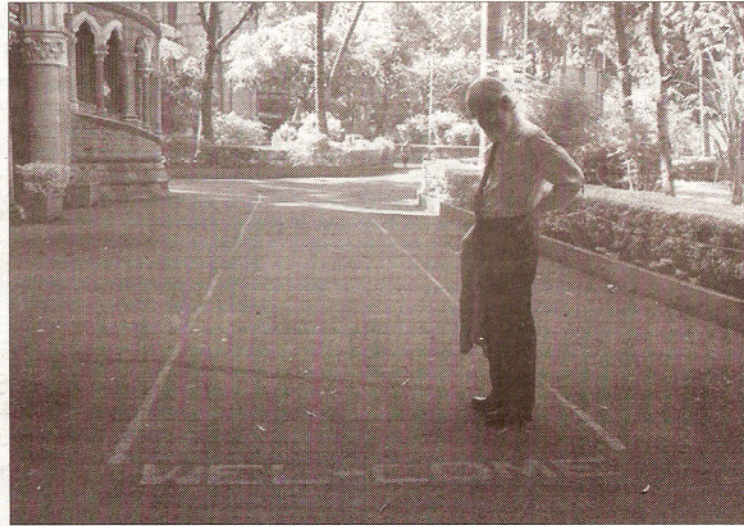
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◀ **Page 1** British English. The same linguistic diversity is apparent in the films — over a thousand each year — produced by Bollywood studios.

What status will this rapidly growing English dialect have in the eyes of the rest of the world? Linguistic status is always a reflection of power — political, technological, economic, cultural, religious — so this is really a question relating to the future of India as a world player. India is likely to become an eventual cyber-technological superpower. The call-centre phenomenon has stimulated a huge expansion of internet-related activity. The amount of daily text-messaging (SMS) exceeds the UK and US. The IT press is always speculating about where future Googles will come from. One day it will be India.

India has a unique position in the English-speaking world. It is a linguistic 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. China is the closest competitor for the English-speaking record with some 220 million speakers of English, but China does



David Crystal encounters a new word break in Mumbai

not have the pervasive English linguistic environment encountered in India; nor does it have the strength of linguistic tradition that provides multiple continuities with the rest of the English-speaking world.

When Indian operators answer your call about train times between Birmingham and Glasgow, they are

far more likely to be aware of where you are travelling than would any equivalent operators in China.

And it is the Indian presence in Britain that marks the other end of this linguistic continuity. British people are familiar with (British dialects of) Indian English as a result of several generations of immigration.

Signs of the times

The following examples of Indian English usage were all seen on the 132km of road between Pune and Mumbai

- Overspeeding and tyre-bursting cause accidents
- Do not crisscross on the expressway
- Do not litter on your expressway
- Speed breaker ahead (road bump)
- Pay 'n' park
- Landscaping and beautification
- Road in curve ahead
- Please drive slow
- Parking inside the lawn is strictly prohibited
- No 2-/3-wheelers (2-wheelers is the generic term for motorbikes and scooters; 3-wheelers are auto-rickshaws)

When the TV comedy programme *The Kumars At Number 42* became successful in Britain, I heard local English kids using its catchphrases and copying its speech rhythms, just as they did when *Crocodile Dundee* made them play with Australian English. There are parallels in the literary world. Suhayl Saadi's new novel,

Psychoraag, is an amazing mixture of South Asian English (Urdu, in this case), Standard English, and Glaswegian. We ain't seen nothin' yet.

And India is special in one other respect. Alongside the spread of English there is a powerful concern for the maintenance of indigenous languages. I repeatedly heard young students express the need for a balance between an outward-looking language of empowerment and an inward-looking language of identity.

"Choose your language for your power bill" says one of the Mumbai billboards, offering Marathi, Hindi, Gujarathi, and English. Many of the smaller tribal languages are seriously endangered, but there is an enviable awareness of the problem that is lacking in many western countries. India, it seems, can teach the rest of the world some lessons not only about multidialectism but about multilingualism too.

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