

# English as a Global Language

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There are enough indications that English as a Global Language is gaining recognition as a special phenomenon. Thus, for example, we have journals like **World Englishes** and **English World-Wide**, and books such as **English as a World Language**, **English Around the World**, and **English in the World**, devoted entirely to the study of Global English; all this is indicative of the fact that Global English is being recognized as a field of study in its own right. And yet it seems to me that we have been tardy in taking the next step, which is that of recognising that this new phenomenon requires theoretical perspectives of its own.

As can be seen in the writings of Braj Kachru and others, we seem to have made considerable progress in this direction during the last few years. Thus more and more people are giving up the assumption that English is primarily an Anglo–American, Judeo–Christian phenomenon. A related assumption that is also being given up today is the tenet that Anglo–American norms should be the final arbiters in all matters pertaining to the use of English, such as pronunciation, stylistic preferences, etc.

What has not been sufficiently recognized, in my opinion, is that English as a Global language is not merely an international language, that Global English even as an international language represents a totally new phenomenon in human history. It is not sufficient to realize that the domain of Global English now includes 'such typically distinct varieties as pidgins and creoles, 'new' Englishes, and a range of differing standard and non-standard varieties that are spoken on a regular basis in more than 60 countries around the world' (Jenny Cheshire, 1991). The world has seen quite a few international languages in the past, but not anything like English. The uniqueness of English as an international language is not merely a matter of scale. Global English is a distinct and new phenomenon with a dynamism and a logic of its own. What we need today is an adequate theory of Global English.

Kachru (1985) comes nearest to recognizing this position in a number of his papers. For example, in one of his papers he declares :

My position is that the diffusion of English, its acculturation, its international functional range, and the diverse forms of literary activity it is accommodating are historically unprecedented. I do not think that linguists, pedagogues, language planners – and, if I might include the purists here – have ever faced this type of linguistic challenge before. I do not believe that the traditional notions of codification, standardization, models, and methods apply to English

any more. The dichotomy of its native and non-native users seems to have become irrelevant.

I wish to argue that to understand Global English adequately we need a somewhat different conceptual framework from the one we use to explain and understand natural languages. In other words, Global English is not merely a descriptive term, it is a theoretical construct as well. A failure to recognize this has in fact resulted in distortions in our perceptions of its manifestations. Recent history of language studies shows that we made an analogous mistake in being tardy in recognizing that a second language variety is not a deviant form of a first language variety but in certain important ways a manifestation of a distinct theoretical construct. There are indications that a similar mistake is being made in the case of Global English.

I shall try in this paper to delineate some of the contours which make Global English a distinctive theoretical notion. I shall use for this purpose some data from one of the varieties of World English that I am somewhat familiar with, namely, Indian English. In Section 1 of this paper I shall look at certain kinds of misperceptions about Indian Writing in English and show how they arise by our failure to recognize the unique nature of Global English. In Section 2, I shall show how this failure has also confused issues relevant to the choice of an educational model of spoken English for India.

There are different perceptions about English in India. Some have been hostile to it because they tend to regard it primarily as a remnant of a foreign imposition, a vestige of our colonial past, and as a language which has usurped the rightful place of indigenous languages and their literatures. It has been looked upon with favour by those who regard it primarily as a valuable means of promoting the commercial, economic, technological and industrial interests of the country in the modern world. A few have seen it as an immense cultural asset, as our window not only on world science but also on world culture. There is, however, another equally important dimension of English: English is a valuable resource for India not only because it opens to us the magnificent countries of the mind but also because it renders possible to us the most magnificent expression of our own soul. Some Indians have felt that India needs English to express her inmost individuality which, they feel, cannot be expressed through any other language.

There has been a growing perception that the English language, particularly in many of the Third World Countries 'will continue to grow, in the breadth of its uses and the number of its users, for just so long as those who use it feel it as their own possession, with its own range of uses, its own body of users, its own set of linguistic features' (Pride 1982). Pride rightly stresses the point that "The English language of the future must be accepted from within, rather than be felt as something imposed from outside". English is probably the first language in recent human history to have ever been accepted 'from within', so widely. This

acceptance from within by people of diverse linguistic backgrounds and from different parts of the world is an important feature of a World language.

Nothing illustrates this inward acceptance of English better than the case for Indian writing in English made nearly 50 years ago by K. D. Sethna (1953, 1968). Sethna points out how English because of the extraordinary crop of poets in English history is not only unquestionably the most highly developed of modern languages but also how English has come to surpass all modern languages, including those of India herself, in acquiring the immediacies and intimacies of intuitive speech and thus become a language best suited to express the 'true soul' of India.

. . . English is bound to be most valuable to the genius of a country which is not only synthetical and assimilative in the extreme but also spiritual in the n<sup>th</sup> degree; for, a speech with extraordinary potentialities of strangely suggestive effects suits most the magic, the mystery, the depth, the sudden revelatory reach of the spiritual consciousness. English promises, therefore, to be the expressive body par excellence of our true soul.

Sethna was careful to recognize that not every Indian would have either the gift or the urge for using the English language for creative self-expression. But he declared that to maintain that Indian writing in English can only be an exotic curiosity and never an organic unfolding of genuine Indianness is to indulge in a sweeping superficiality.

During the last five decades Indo-Anglian literature has established itself firmly through a whole host of writers. Iyengar (1985, 4<sup>th</sup> edition) is a recent history of this literature that runs into 848 pages. And yet doubts of various kinds have been expressed either about the authenticity of this literature and its value or both. An evaluation of Indo-Anglian literature is not relevant to my purposes here. I am interested here only in the nature of the reasons advanced for doubting the adequacy of English to be a literary medium of genuinely Indian sensibility and in the nature of the response this skepticism evokes.

The English Language and the Indian Spirit : Correspondence between Kathleen Raine and K D Sethna (1986) is a valuable document devoted to this issue. Kathleen Raine is an eminent English poet and critic and Sethna is one of the finest critics and poets of our time writing in English in India. This correspondence spans the period 1961 to 64 and it has a sequel to it. Kathleen Raine in her letters takes the position that an alien tongue such as English cannot be an authentic voice of India, and Sethna tries to show why Raine's position is untenable.

Raine raises this problem in one of her early letters (dated 5.8.61) thus:

Only one thing troubles me : why do you write in English? You write of the land of India, subtilised in an almost physical sense, by the quality of life that has been lived there; is not the same thing true of language? Have you not in using English, exiled your poetic genius from India, to which it must belong, without making it a native of England, for English learned as a foreign language can never nourish the invisible roots of poetry . . . . **I do not believe that we can – or if we could, that we have the right to – write poetry in a language other than our own.** (emphasis added)

Raine is asking here whether English which is learned as a foreign / second language in India can ever nourish the roots of poetry for Indians. She is not questioning whether Indian English is a legitimate variety of English and she therefore cannot be held guilty of the attitudinal sins which, according to Kachru (1976), Prator (1968) commits in his 1968 paper entitled “The British Heresy in TESL”.

Although Kachru’s reply was adequate to Prator’s kind of “ethnocentrism”, it does not directly address Raine’s question, which is, why does an Indian writer like, say, Sethna or Harindranath Chattopadhyay use English for writing poetry, because according to her a foreign language cannot nourish the roots of poetry. The assumption here is that one can not express himself creatively except in one’s own native language.

In a subsequent letter (dated 1.11.61) Raine puts her objection to writing poetry in a foreign language more precisely :

You write about the superb correspondence of Sanskrit words to meanings that are not so much defined by them as made resonant in them. In the case of Sanskrit their precision is perhaps (I speak in ignorance) greatest in the metaphysical level, least in the natural. **Now the English language is just the opposite; its beauty lies in its ability to convey the very nature of England, its woods and flowers and weather and animals and people with their peculiarly English attitudes . . . .** You may use English abstract terms, or such international and empty words for uses they were never born for, since words cannot be separated from the particular group–soul, grown on a certain kind of earth, under certain skies, and conversing for centuries upon certain skies, and conversing for centuries upon certain themes (Catholic Christendom up to the Renaissance, and other mentalities since then) with people of a certain shared kind and quality, class or caste. **A world–language would be no language at all -- at least to poets it would be no language at all.** (emphasis added).

In reply, Sethna points out :

**The fact is that the words of a language are never born once for all with an aptness to just one type of outlook and attitude, character and temperament. The mentality of a group is itself an evolving phenomenon and words are constantly getting reborn.** Their rebirth is not confined to the group's development, either; they take on new uses in the midst of novel patterns of experience under the "plastic press" of an original individuality. Particularly is this true of English words, for the English group-soul itself is of a most diversified oneness. Thus there is such a heterogeneity in it that there is no persistent tradition of literary \_expression, of style. Style in English is a thousand different things; the personal element is rampant. English literature is not so much a nation speaking in a single recognizable voice as a crowd of men commingling their idiosyncratic accents. And some of these individuals are so uncommon that at first sight they hardly seem English in their \_expression, and yet they stand as genuine creators of English literature. (emphasis added)

Before we come to the heart of Sethna's case for Indian writing in English, it might be useful to note that there are two interesting points that Raine has pointedly raised here: one is that only in one's mother tongue can one really write poetry, and two, that a world language is no language at all for poetry, however useful it may be globally for the more mundane purposes of trade and commerce. The second point is not crucial to my argument in this paper. I shall therefore consider in brief only her contention that the heart of India cannot express itself in a foreign tongue, in this case, English.

The notion of a mother tongue or even of a native speaker is an elusive one (Paikeday, 1987). The general assumption, however, is that one's mother tongue is the most natural medium for creative self-\_expression. Nolini Kanta Gupta (1970) opens up for us a new way of looking at this question of what can be a natural medium for creative self-\_expression. Referring to the view held by many that a language which is not native to one cannot be used creatively for literary \_expression, he points out :

But this is judging the present or the future by the past. Mankind is no longer exclusively or even mainly national in its outlook; it cannot remain so if it is to progress, to take the next step in evolution. We say if mankind overpasses the nationalistic stage and attains something of the international consciousness and disposition, it would be possible and even natural for a few at least among the educated to express themselves in and through the wider world language, not merely as an instrument of business deal, but as a vehicle of literary and aesthetic creation . . . . A language learnt for commercial and diplomatic transaction cannot

remain limited to that function. Those who intend merely to learn may end very probably by cultivating it. (pp. 289 – 90)

Gupta makes a case here for English as the natural medium for the emerging international or global consciousness, and suggests that whoever possesses this consciousness, no matter whether English is native to him or not, may find it natural for him to use English as the medium of his creative self-expression.

There is another variant of the mother tongue argument which runs somewhat like this: if a foreign language is to be the medium of literary expression even for the few, then they must have a living contact with the people who breathe the atmosphere of the language and live it. Gupta (1970) admits that in India English never was a flowering from the mother soil; it was something imposed from above, at best grafted from outside. But then he points out that “. . . a national language flowers in one way, an international language flowers in another way. The atmosphere if not the soil, will be, in the new international consciousness, the inner life of mankind . . . . And minds open to it, soaked in it will find it quite natural to express themselves in a language that embodies that spirit”. (p. 291) Thus Gupta is suggesting that English is the linguistic counterpart of the new global consciousness and it can therefore be the natural choice of those who have attained this consciousness. In other words, the older notion of a mother tongue is not relevant to Global English.

Gupta here is trying to come to terms with Global English as a new phenomenon and contents that the use of English by a small group of Indians cannot be regarded as strange or unnatural just because English is not their mother tongue in the older sense. Now to return to Sethna who offers yet one perspective on World English and makes an even more persuasive case for Indian writing in English:

. . . English is a language I find more suited to the deepest movements of the Indian soul than are any of the modern Indian languages. The only rival to it with regard to these movements of the Indian soul is ancient Sanskrit which cannot in its full historical form be revived for common use today. I am not flashing out a paradox when I write that, together with the Sanskrit of the Rigveda, the Upanishads and the Gita, the English of Shakespeare, Milton, Vaughan, Donne, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Francis Thompson, Patmore (of The Unknown Eros) Whitman, Hopkins, AE and Yeats, is the most subtly, intensely, profoundly developed language in the world, and **if a new and modern Rigveda or Upanishad or Gita will be written it will first be in English!** A further truth with the appearance of a paradox is that, since English is the language most subtly, intensely, profoundly developed and since India is still the country with the greatest spiritual experience, **the spiritual fulfillment of English**

**speech along the lines indicated of initiated by many English poets themselves will first come – if it already hasn't – through Indians and not Englishmen**, Indians who have steeped themselves not only in the deepest culture of their own land by Yogic discipline but also in the finest essence of English culture that has been diffused here for some centuries. The coming together, rather the love-affair, of India and the English language has on it the stamp of the divine destiny. (pp.10–11) (emphasis added)

My aim here in highlighting this segment of the correspondence between Raine and Sethna is to show how certain kinds of problems which are legitimate in the context of a natural human language lose their point when used in the context of global English. Consider, for example, Sethna's contention that "if a new and modern Rigveda or Upanishad or Gita will be written it will be first be in English". The Rigveda, the Upanishads and the Gita are the expressions of the profoundest soul-stirring articulated by the Indian consciousness. If such soul-stirrings were once again to move an Indian, he would seek to express them first in English. This claim by Sethna shows how intimate the inner bond can be which many people feel with the English language. A somewhat analogous sentiment has been expressed by P. Lal (Iyengar 1985), another eminent Indo-Anglian poet, in the following words :

Without trying to be facetious, I should like to suggest that only in English can real Indian poetry be written; any other poetry is likely to be Bengali-slanted or Gujarati-biased, and so on. Only Indian writing in English can hope to attain the 'Indian' flavour.

It should be possible to find statements expressing similar sentiments about English made by non-native speakers of English from other parts of the world. Thus, for example, Leopold S. Senghor, a leading poet of Senegal regards English as "an instrument which, with its plasticity, its rhythm and its melody, corresponds to the profound, volcanic affectivity of the Black Peoples".

Consider also the ring of self-confidence in Sethna's words when he says, ". . . spiritual fulfillment of English speech along the lines indicated or initiated by many English poets themselves will first come – if it already hasn't – through Indians and not an Englishman . . ." Sethna is saying that the first fully developed spiritual voice in English will be that of an Indian. He even implies that such a voice has already appeared, namely, Sri Aurobindo whose epic poem **Savitri** has been hailed by some Western critics as 'probably the greatest epic in the English language' although Indian academia continues to be baffled by it.

It is not crucial to my argument here that you accept the claims made for Indian writing in English either by Sethna, Gupta or by Lal. What is important is the very presence of this sentiment which English invokes in people like Sethna, Lal and Leopold S. Senghor. They feel that English is the natural voice of their inmost

being, as if it is almost their mother tongue. This is a characteristic feature of Global English; it evokes mother tongue like sentiments even from people for whom it is not the mother tongue. A Global Language seems to have the potential of being an auxiliary mother tongue of all citizens of the world no matter what their primary mother tongue is. This seems to be one of the properties of a Global Language.

It is important to realise that there is no implication here that English is the only or even the primary language of creative \_expression for Indians. That undoubtedly is the prerogative of indigenous Indian languages for a vast majority of Indians. What is claimed here is that English can be for some Indians the authentic voice of their creative self as Indian languages are for many others.

I shall now move on to a more familiar field where the failure to appreciate the special nature of English as a Global Language has confused issues. I shall look briefly at the problem of deciding what should be an educational model for spoken English in India. This discussion is intended to bring out another feature of Global English and also suggest a condition which is needed for its natural evolution.

Prator's (1968) main objection to accepting an Indian variety of spoken English as an educational model for Indians was the following :

. . . in a nutshell, the heretical tenet I feel I must take exception to is the idea that it is best, **in a country where English is not spoken natively** but is widely used as the medium of instruction, to set up the local variety of English as the ultimate model to be imitated by those learning the language. (Prator, 1968: P. 459). (emphasis added)

Prator's point simply is that since varieties of Indian English are not native varieties, no variety of Indian English can be suitable to be adopted as an educational model. I do not wish to raise here the issue whether the dichotomies such as native and non-native are legitimate distinctions. But whatever its value in other contexts, it is my contention that such a dichotomy and the value judgements based on it cannot be used in the case of Global English.

Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens (1964) were more sympathetic to the use of non-native varieties as educational models. However, they suggested two criteria to determine whether a variety of English is acceptable for use as an educational model.

First, it must be a variety actually used by a reasonably large body of the population, in particular by a proportion of those whose level of education makes them in other respects desirable models . . .  
Second, it must be mutually intelligible with other varieties of

English used by similar professional and educational groups in other countries . . . . It follows from this that the extent of deviation from Standard English grammar and lexis must be small. It also follows, as far as phonology is concerned, that while the actual quality of vowels and consonants may vary a great deal between one accent and another, the number of contrasts, the number of phonological units, and the number of systems being operated must also remain fairly close to those of other 'educated accents', since otherwise speakers of one would have greater difficulty in understanding speakers of others.

I doubt whether in a country like India where English is learnt mostly through formal schooling and study we can ever find a variety of English which satisfies the two criteria mentioned by Halliday et al. and which would therefore be acceptable as an educational model. Variations within a lect in second language varieties tend to be far more idiosyncratic than those in first language varieties. Take, for instance, the kind of English that is called General Indian English that is recommended as an educational model for India (CIE Monograph 7). According to even the writers of this monograph it is a 'reformed' version of the educated variety of Indian English actually used. In other words, it is an artificial model in the sense that it is arrived at by bringing about selective reform in a certain variety of Educated Indian English by adding to it features such as stress, and certain consonant distinctions such as /z, v, w/ and the aspiration of voiceless plosives when initial in stressed syllables, etc. This strategy of proposing as an educational model a variety of English not actually used by a sizeable group of speakers in the country has been criticized for that reason; it does not satisfy the first criterion mentioned by Halliday et al. in the quotation above.

But in my view this strategy is the only sensible means of finding a compromise between the educational arguments for a model of spoken English that would be intelligible outside one's own state and country, and the sociolinguistic arguments which allow each community to evolve its own model. Once again the first criterion suggested above by Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens is a criterion for a natural language but for World English this criterion is not applicable.

I also feel that fresh thinking is called for on this bogey of intelligibility across countries that is often raised. Otherwise we are likely to thwart the natural evolution of Global English by straight-jacketing it to fit our expectations about other languages. In recent years Quirk (1985) has strongly advocated the desirability of a global standard for English to ensure that the acceptance and encouragement of local varieties, particularly in countries like India where English is a second language, does not become detrimental to global communication. Referring to ESL and EFL countries Quirk (1985) has said: "The relatively narrow range of purposes for which the non-native needs to use English (even in ESL countries) is arguably well catered for by a single monochrome standard form that looks as good on paper as it sounds in speech".

I am inclined to agree more with Graeme Kennedy (1986) who points out in his comments on Quirk's remarks:

Since English is so much the world's language, international popular culture may be a more powerful determinant on norms than so-called standards, whether or not they have official or educational sanctions. I suspect that in the final analysis, the vast majority of users of English tend to adopt local varieties, regardless of the admonitions of teachers.

I question the assumption that because English is a global language which is being increasingly used for international communication, every learner, let us say in a country like India, where English is taught at the level of primary schools most often by teachers totally ill-equipped for the task, should be required to acquire an internationally intelligible model of English. (Nadkarni 1983).

It may sound like a paradox but I feel that a Global Language will establish itself more firmly in the minds and hearts of people belonging to different language groups in the world to the extent it allows them latitude to realize and express their individuality in it and through it. And the way one pronounces a language is one of the things one is most sensitive about. Generally, an Indian using English takes greater offence when you correct his pronunciation than when you correct his grammar.

Until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, French was a greater international language than English. Today the influence of French has diminished outside the franco-phone countries while English is gaining everywhere. There certainly are a host of reasons to which English owes its ascendancy today. But one of these reasons is probably that the teaching of impeccable, native, French was an explicit policy of French governments while the British have been more tolerant in this respect and have taken a more or less neutral attitude towards the emergence of different national English accents. World English will no doubt continue this tradition. This latitude that English has so far enjoyed in developing according to the individualities of the different communities which use it is one of the necessary conditions for the growth of a Global Language. It is because of such a freedom which English has enjoyed that Sethna and others like him can make the kinds of claims they have made about English.

In my view, with regard to intelligibility Chinese is probably the right model for Global English. Chinese dialects are intelligible outside the dialect boundary only in the written form but are not always intelligible across this divide in the spoken form. I am not suggesting that English should adopt an ideographic writing system. What is an attractive feature of Chinese is that it is intelligible across dialect boundaries at least in the written medium if not in the spoken medium. Similarly Global English does not have to aim at every speaker of its innumerable varieties being intelligible to all other speakers of the language in the spoken as

well as the written medium. If you consider the global scope of English, this would seem to be totally impracticable. As it is, many of the varieties of Indian English are not intelligible to speakers of many varieties of British or American English or even to speakers of ESL varieties such as Nigerian English. But global communication through English does not mean that each individual who learns English has to have this competence. When English is taught more or less as a compulsory subject at school to literally scores of millions of students, the aim of this teaching cannot be attaining international intelligibility in the spoken form. English will have to be content to aim at such international intelligibility primarily at the receptive level and that too in the written variety. What about intelligibility at the spoken level? This requirement will be effectively met by some 'brokers', who have either the special gift or have had the opportunities of picking up a variety of internationally intelligible spoken English.

To conclude, I have discussed in this paper two characteristics of English as a Global Language and also one condition which is crucial to its natural evolution. This may be seen as a small attempt at characterizing Global English as a distinct phenomenon. The two properties are :

1. A Global Language is a language which evokes mother tongue like sentiments among people of diverse linguistic backgrounds for whom it is not their natural mother tongue. In other words, a Global Language is potentially an auxiliary mother tongue of all those who wish to use it as a mother tongue.
2. In the case of a Global Language an educational model, particularly for spoken English can be a synthetic model, a model which is not used by any sizeable speech community within that country.

The condition for the natural evolution of a World Language is that it gives to those who use it enough latitude to make it their own; this is needed to make them feel for it the kind of closeness and loyalty which one feels for one's mother tongue. A Global Language unites people because it enables each linguistic community which uses it to feel at home within its fold. The function of a Global Language is to foster an international or global consciousness without suppressing diversity in its manifestation. English needs to be liberated from the restrictions we still seem to impose on it because we do not always seem to be able to remember that it is a new linguistic phenomenon. We should not shackle the new by seeking to impose on it the restrictions of the old.

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