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Indo-English and Anglo-Indish

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We know about the influence of English on the Indian languages, but we need to understand better how Indian words and phrases penetrated English and the social mechanisms underlying their usage in colonial India. How did the English learn to speak like that 'only'?

She sat upon her Dobie, To watch the Evening Star,
And all the Punkahs as they passed, Cried, "My! how fair you are!"
Around her bower, with quivering leaves,
The tall Kamsamahs grew, And Kitmutgars in wild festoons
Hung down from Tchokis blue…
She sat upon her Dobie, She heard the Nimak hum,
When all at once a cry arose: 'The Cummerbund is come!'

[Dobie= dhobi; Punkah = pankha; Kansamah= khansama major-domo; Kitmutgar = khidmatgar; main table servant; Tchoki= chowki; Nimak= namak; Cummerbund= kamarband, a broad sash]

The English humorist Edward Lear traveled through British India in the winter of 1873-74. He was immediately struck by the possibilities of the strange language that he found the British upper-class English speaking there. His humorous poem was published in the *Times of India* (Bombay) in 1874. But it was not the first dig at 'Anglo-Indian English'. The Bengal Army officer G.F. Atkinson published *Curry and Rice on Forty Plates* in London in 1859. It described "our station" as rejoicing in the "euphonious name of Kabob; it is situated in the plains of Degchy [*degchi*, a cooking pot], in the province of Bobarchy [*bawarchi*, cook]." Turmeric was the Judge, and so Mrs. Turmeric was the Burra Beebee, the great lady of Kabob. Other characters were given similar names.

While Lear, Atkinson, and many others deliberately misapplied many Hindustani words that they employed (in English mispronunciation), yet the jokes turn upon such use of common terms of British conversation and even writing. There have been many books that consider the effect of English upon Indian languages. Humorous books and essays written by those affecting a superior grasp of the language mock different variants spoken by others, the "lesser breeds without the law" as Kipling called them. We have not often considered how Indian languages affected English as spoken in the Empire and even back 'Home', in Bilayut or Blighty. This word literally means a province (*wilayat*) but goes back to the days when Ottomans informed credulous easterners that Christians came from rebellious provinces of the Sultan's empire. Some of the said rebels then applied it to their own home island.

Scholars have not thought much about the social mechanisms of these usages. This is what this short essay addresses. What caused the English to speak like that only?

Godown English or box-wallah lingos

The answers go back to the beginnings of the English presence in Asia, long before Britain even existed. It begins with their Portuguese predecessors who first discovered the southern sea route to Asia.

This essay develops three parts: mercantile English as a trade language; Saheblog or bungalow English; and the barracks English spoken in the cantonment. The first men to be called 'box-wallahs' were peddlers who came to the sahib's bungalow with boxes of goods to sell. But the members of the 'heaven-born' Indian Civil Service, forgetful of their own origins, cavalierly applied the name to such of their European acquaintances as chanced to be employed in large business firms.

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Ironically, the first of these firms was the lineal ancestor of the Government of India, being the English East India Company that arrived in the Indian Ocean in the early 1600s. The first 'box-wallahs' were modestly paid young Englishmen with a bare minimum of

education. They often supplemented their limited salaries by semi-legal means. Officially they were termed 'writers' because they were needed to maintain ledgers, update accounts, and copy letters back to the ever-suspicious head office in London, which could not understand Asian languages or forms of account.

Writers staffed the scattered 'factories' where Company agents ('factors') resided and stored goods awaiting export. The goods included the skilfully woven and strikingly dyed fabrics long fashionable from Japan to Mozambique. Actively promoted by the English, Dutch and French, a new demand for these sprang up in the West. Fabrics were ordered and acquired through Indian intermediaries. There were no names for their many varieties and little time to write up the ledgers as goods accumulated in the godown. Indigenous terms suggested by local brokers and garbled in foreign pronunciation were perforce adopted. Thus, the bazaar was the first source of textile and commodity names entering languages, and being spread around the Indo-Pacific region.

These words often came through Portuguese. The Portuguese had discovered and, for a hundred years, monopolised the sea route to Asia around the Cape of Good Hope. Like the Spanish, they were proud their imperial language. They introduced some textile names, like 'beatilhas' (fine muslin used in veils) for trade goods, but recognisably adopted local ones too. The Fleming Linschoten wrote in 1598 of 'linens' that they were of "divers sorts … called Serampuras, Cassas, Comsas, Beattillias, Satopassas, and a thousand such names." Coins might have a Spanish name ('rea?l', now Arabic 'riya?l') or an Arabic one, 'xera?fin' (from *ashrafi*, 'noble').

Arabic words were borrowed by the Portuguese who despite their profound hatred of Muslims yet used many trade terms from that language. As is well-known, the word monsoon was first adapted into Portuguese as 'monço?e', from the Arabic *mausim*, 'season'. The word came into English, where it is applied to any marked wet season following a dry summer. The Arabs had labeled non-Muslim Africans 'kafir', 'infidel'. The Portuguese adopted this as 'cafre', adding the diminutive 'cafrin?ho' for a boy of that category. They additionally gave it a racial connotation, regardless of religion. Dutch South Africans thus referred to a type of sorghum as 'kaffir corn' and one occasionally still hears of 'kaffir lime', a citrus fruit.

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The Iberians had also long referred to Muslims by the geographic name 'Moro' (Moroccan). In the Indian Ocean, they encountered the North Indian lingua franca, Hindustani and promptly labeled it a 'Muslim' language. The English adopted this idea and called the language 'Moors'. The early linguist John Gilchrist had to clarify that his dictionary of 'the Grand Popular Language of Hindoostan' referred to what was "Vulgarly, But Improperly Called The Moors." Indeed, a number of later ethnic and societal categories were introduced by the Portuguese, including 'casta' (modern caste). Some of those appear in a letter from Goa in 1558:

"Sa?o muy diversos nas naçoens; scilicet, portugeses, castiços e mestiços, mallaveres, bramines, canorins, harabios, dacanins, bengalas, malucos, jaos, chinas, abexins, cafres." [My translation: They are of various births - that is to say, Portuguese, both pure-caste and mixed, Malabaris, Brahmans, Kannadigas, Arabs, Dakhanis, Bengalis, Moluccans, Javans, Chinese, Abyssinians, Africans].

When the English first arrived, they necessarily employed many of the Portuguese speakers they found around the coast, usually in menial capacities. Terminology accompanied them: consider a word that has been widely adopted into Indian languages: peon. It derives from the Portuguese word for a foot man or inferior retainer. Ayah, nurse-maid or woman servant, also still current in India, was an old Portuguese term for that role.

Sometimes words came from Portuguese and were applied to several different classes of being. The Portuguese used 'baneanes' to mean the hereditary business classes (*vania, bania*). The English followed suit. We find this as early as 1689, when Ovington called them 'bannians'. This word was adopted into English as *banyan/banian*, and applied among other things to the fig tree sacred to the 'banyans'. Early English often had 'banians' as personal business agents (later often called *sarkar*/*sircar*)

'Banian' also became a garment: Beverly Lemire has traced this history from a Japanese prototype to an Indian luxury calico through the 17th century. This was a loose cotton garment, often elaborately hand painted with the durable dyes that Indian dyers were famous for. It was adopted by Europeans for comfort and was a large garment somewhat like the later European dressing gown. But men of science and other worthies often chose to have their portraits painted wearing it. Admiralty official Samuel Pepys even rented one so as to be shown wearing one in his portrait. However, the name was adopted for a knitted rather than a woven textile and in the 20th century it meant an undershirt. It then became the widely understood Indian word *baniya?n* - now a close-fitting undershirt intended to

protect the western-style shirt from perspiration.

The East India Company wanted intelligible communications from Asia in order to supervise the doings of their subordinates there. But its agents there soon began to borrow words from local languages to label a variety of things that had no English equivalent, and some that did. The resulting opacity angered the ever-vigilant head office in England who reproved their Council in Surat in the early years of its existence. In response, Surat council replied that that they had

> forbidden the severall Factoryes from wrighting words in this languadge and refrayned itt our selues, though in bookes of Coppies wee feare there are many which by wante of tyme for perusall wee cannot rectifie or expresse." (Surat Factors to Court, 26 February, 1617).

Such adoption of local terminology was functionally explicable. The English and Dutch companies pioneered the new export trade in cotton textiles from India to Europe in the 1600s. A few English brokers and agents sat in their factory warehouses slowly collecting and inspecting bales and bundles of fabrics and different kinds of cloth. When letters from London came out with an outbound ship, they also began sending out orders for the next season for specific designs or particular types of cloth. Local agents were dealing with Indians who used their own terms or simply described origins by place-names. A shared trade terminology sprang up despite all reprimands from London. A few of these textile names are still around: calico from Calicut, muslin from Masulipatnam, palampore (Palampur - which one?) chintz ('sprinkled, dotted'); some are obsolete: nainsukh (pleasing the eye), bafta (woven), kinkhwab (Emily Eden's 'kincob', a gold brocade) and many others.

Beyond function however, we should also consider the career value of learning and using such language. If the only Englishman who could tell a bafta from a beatilla was caught embezzling, the local chief might well overlook it for fear of missing the shipping season. 'Insider' languages both mark and privilege insiders.

Sahibs, memsahibs, baba-log: Bungalow English

After merchant's English, I turn to Lear's likely audience: middle class English expatriates and their connections in Britain. Its first speakers would all have been educated in Britain and many came to India as young adults. Yet the *Times of India* (and Lear) could presume that the upper and middle classes would get the jokes in this poem, because they knew what these words actually meant. These readers were the *sahib-log*. Sahib is an Arabic title used to refer to the companions of the Prophet Muhammad. It was then adopted as a title of honour amongst Muslims. In India however, the English elite selected this as practically a racial title. For many decades, such British men as could afford it maintained an establishment of concubines, usually given the Turkic title of *bibi*; the most important one in the 'station' was (with the English disregard of nominal genders) the *burra beebee*, the senior lady. As growing racial exclusiveness led to the increasing presence of British wives, the term 'burra beebee' was sometimes applied to them. By the 1840s, this had a slightly satirical sound. Lady Falkland, wife of the 'La?t? Sa?heb' (lord saheb, governor) of Bombay, wrote that 'burra beebees' leaving Calcutta for England thought their status would travel with them. They could not conceive that they "would be but 'small folk' in London." In India, Lady Falkland added, it was improper for any junior's wife to leave a ball or dinner till the relevant senior consort had departed. But a ball was not a 'nautch', though women danced. Another aristocrat, Emily Eden was mildly concerned that a Sikh diplomatic mission visiting her brother, Governor-General Lord Auckland, might consider the women dancing to be mere 'nautch-girls'.

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When English wives became common in the Empire in India, Indians who had gendered the word sahib as exclusively male, prefaced it with 'mem' - from 'ma'am' to designate the female of the species. In south India it became 'madam-sahib'. When *Hobson-Jobson* was re-edited in 1903, the senior officer's wife in a station was more grammatically titled '*bari mem*'. If there were young children, the English word 'baby' was gendered feminine by Hindustani speakers, and male children were 'baba', girls 'bebi', and all of them collectively were the 'baba-log'.

But let us move from the bungalow and the ballroom to the 'duftur' (office) or 'adalat' (court of justice) whence so much terminology came. The East India Company borrowed heavily from Mughal Persian. Courts were termed 'adalat'; divided into civil 'diwani' courts, from the fiscal officer of Mughal times, and criminal 'faujdari' courts, from the chief of police. The 800 or so ICS men and perhaps 5,000 army officers spent their days in the company of much larger numbers of Indians. English-speakers were few outside the major

military stations and the few metropolitan cities. Even otherwise, officials had immense numbers of Indian subordinates, whose terminology shaped the first officialese.

'Our Judge'



In some cases (see image below) documents were drafted and completed by Indian subordinates while their notional lord smoked and read the English papers.



For officials such as the one pictured above, the most convenient way of getting business done was to get a senior Indian official to roughly render reports into English and then sign them. Tax assessment reports were therefore termed 'jamabandi'; they might contain a statement of *jama wasul baki* ('assessment, collection, and arrears') among many others. A finalised arrangement - of taxation or any

other business - was a *bandobast* ('binding and fastening', of the records). The sahib ate breakfast and that was when select subordinates appeared for their orders: hence that meal became his *chota hazri* ('little roll-call'). Additionally, even junior army officers would have five or six Indian servants. Around 1850, a newly arrived British Army officer was expected to budget for six servants, ranging from the sweeper at four rupees monthly to the 'bearer' at seven.

It is not surprising that the result of so much interaction was reproved by Sir Charles Napier, then governor of Bombay in these words:

> The Governor unfortunately does not understand Hindostanee, nor Persian, nor Mahratta or any other eastern dialect. He will feel particularly obliged to Collectors, sub-collectors and officers writing the proceedings of Courts-martial and all Staff Officers to indite their various papers in English, larded with as small portion of the to him unknown tongues as they conveniently can, instead of those he generally receives - namely Hindostanee larded with occasional words in English.

What is interesting is how quickly English newcomers adopted local terms. Emily Eden was unselfconsciously writing of *sircars* (agents) and *hurkurrahs* (messengers) without translation to her English relatives within a few months of arrival. She described having an escort of *shooter suwars* (camel riders) - which she translated.

Many people in Britain clearly understood 'Anglo-Indian English'. It was an insider's speech, it marked membership of an elite like the Lang family. A.M. Lang wrote a series of letters from Agra to his mother (herself daughter of an earlier Company official) in England in 1857-58. The letters are sprinkled with Anglo-Indish. Lang reported for example, that the "Keraniesses" were now in Agra Fort, or that they had gone out with their male equivalents to watch the battle, when a temporary setback resulted in the "pale-faced Keranies and their ladies" fleeing for safety. This is clearly the Bengali word *kera?ni?*, a clerk or accountant. Here it was racialised and applied to the Eurasian clerks who staffed many junior bureaucratic positions. But it has unusually been endowed with gender - we also find 'Keraniesses'. Following the rebels' defeat "there was a daur [*daur*, 'run', or here, a chase] of course, and some men shot and some hung." But the Anglophone difficulty with aspirated consonants visible in Lear's 'dobie' for *dho?bi?* is manifested here too: the "gharis" (Hindustani *ga?ri?*) went off slowly. Such were the speakers of bureaucratic varieties of English.

Barrack-room English

The largest number of Englishmen in India in the 19th century were army rank and file. They wrote less than officers and their wives, even if they could write at all. After the reorganisation of 1862, every British regiment - except for the Guards - had to serve in India. With shorter terms of enlistment, far more men passed through the units than had ever done earlier and more survived to go back to England. They certainly fraternised with South Asian soldiers on occasion. A.M. Lang described a scene in 1857:

> As I walked home from mess last night after the pipers had finished playing, I found knots of mingled Hielanders and Sikhs and Afghans, each jabbering away in his own language, not in the least understood by one another, but great friends, one going 'Weel, weel' and 'Hoot mon', and the other 'Hamne Matadeenko khub mara' [We thrashed Matadeen thoroughly], so on: a great shaven-headed Pathan would be trying on a Hieland bonnet!

So we do not know how much real army slang Kipling retailed in *Barrack Room Ballads*. Was the thoroughly garbled "Kiko kissywarsti don't you humsher argy jow?" ever really uttered? Perhaps it was, if we can judge from sergeant Timothy Gowing's account of asking some Punjabi village women to sell him milk in 1862, after he had been four years in India. Speaking his 'best Hindustanee' he said: 'hum-dood manta hi… hum peisa dada hai' [I want milk… I give money.]

It was unusual for a soldier to be alone as Gowing was, though. Soldiers were cocooned by Indian servants and camp-followers, cooks, sweepers, barbers, grass-cutters, palanquin-bearers, water-carriers, and many others. Their mutual conversation gave the English language the still current 'cushy' (*khus?i?*) and 'khaki' - the latter now bleached of colour. Some few still don 'jodhpurs' before a 'chukker' (literally a 'round', meaning a set interval in polo). On the other hand, 'puttees' [*patti*, strips of cloth wound tightly around the lower leg], 'dixie' [*degchi*, cooking pot], and Blighty are now obsolete. Army slang still crops up in unexpected places however, such as the *Secret Diary of Adrian Mole* where the hero is kicked in the "goolies" ('balls', therefore also bullets) - clearly reflecting a Bengali pronunciation of the word, perhaps acquired from Dum-Dum arsenal (where the first dum-dum bullets were manufactured).

Conclusion

Language plays many roles in human society beyond the simply communicative. John Gumperz, the veteran sociolinguist wrote that beyond information, language use and vocabulary choice serve to create and maintain "the subtle boundaries of power, status, role and occupational specialization that make up the fabric of our social life."

A special language may have served to mask little kickbacks taken when a clerk entered one textile for another. It might have helped the memsahib demand the summoning of a specific servant. It might allow an Indian daftardar (office manager) to draft a memorandum for a sahib who would not bother to read the files. It might have allowed the veterans to laugh at the new recruits (or griffs).

Finally, these distinctions were not invariably subtle: the language of command gave us the Anglo-Indish 'Qui-Hye?' (*ko?i? hai*, anyone there?) - a cry that implied that everyone within earshot was at the speaker's command. It was then used to pejoratively label a particular type of saheb endemic to the Bengal Presidency. Language games have many players and some more powerful than others.

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