

Question Formation in Indian English

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ABSTRACT

English is a glocal language in India as it satisfies both the global and the local needs. The phenomenal rise in the status of English has resulted in an adaptation of English to the cultural and pragmatic needs of the speakers of English in Asian and African countries. Several scholars have expressed the view that we lack exhaustive data for generalizing about the syntax of Indian English. This study is a modest attempt to examine question formation in Indian English as a system in its own right. For this study, examples have been selected from newspapers, magazines, literary texts, television and radio programmes. A questionnaire was also designed to understand the views of British and Indian teachers on Indian English in general and question formation in particular. To make this study more representative, samples have also been collected from the 'International Corpus of English-India Corpus' and the 'Kolhapur Corpus of Indian English'.

Keywords: *Indian English; Question formation; Indian English Corpus.*

Introduction

One of the most notable changes during the past few decades relates to the way English has become increasingly global. Krishnaswamy and Krishnaswamy (2006) refer to this phenomenal spread of English as 'The English Tsunami'. Since the 1950's the non-native varieties of English have been growing in importance and productivity. Indian English is an important ESL (English as a Second language) variety and its significance is generally recognized now by scholars and linguists. English is a glocal language in India as it satisfies both the global and the local needs. It can be said that English in India has acquired

'functional nativeness' as a medium of communication across distinct linguistic and cultural groups.

Definition of Indian English

Due to linguistic and cultural heterogeneity in India, there is some problem in defining what exactly Indian English is. Some scholars think that the concept of Indian English is a myth as no one really uses Indian English, but they use some regional sub-varieties like Marathi English, Bengali English and Tamil English. It is felt that though there are several regional sub-varieties, all these varieties have a 'common core', and this could be labeled as 'Indian

English'. In other words, there is a need to distinguish between 'regionally restricted features' and 'pan Indian features'. Parasher (1991) uses the term 'Educated Standard Variety of Indian English' and defines it as 'that variety of English which is learnt and used by a large number of educated Indians as a second language' (p. 21). Thus, according to him the term 'Indian English' refers to the kind of English that is used by educated Indians whose process of formal education is complete. The present study endorses this definition of Indian English.

Research on the Syntax of Indian English

Several scholars have carried out work on the phonological and morphological features of Indian English, and some books describing these features are available. However, in the area of syntax, we lack exhaustive data and a lot of descriptive work needs to be carried out in this direction. Kachru (1983) comments, 'The description of Indian English grammar is yet far from satisfactory and improvement of it is a crucial undertaking both from lexicological and pedagogical points of view' (p. 178). It is felt that a lot of systematic work needs to be carried out on the syntax of Indian English, as comprehensive description of Indian English at the syntactic level is not yet available. It is hoped that the present study will contribute to the characterization of Indian English.

Methodology

For this study, examples have been selected from newspapers, magazines, literary texts,

television and radio programmes. Utterances as used by educated speakers of Indian English in different real life contexts were noted down at the first instance and such examples have been indicated as (RCE) in the body of this study, which stands for 'real context examples'. The easy availability of language corpora and their processing tools have opened up several new avenues of language research. To make this study more representative, examples have also been selected from the 'International Corpus of English-India Corpus' and 'The Kolhapur Corpus of Indian English'. Such examples have been indicated as (ICE) and (KC) respectively in this study. A questionnaire was also designed for Indian and British teachers to understand their views on Indian English in general and question formation in particular.

Question Formation in Indian English

The interrogative transformation in British English shifts the first constituent of the auxiliary to the pre-subject NP position. However, Indian English has a much simpler system of transformation. There is a tendency in Indian English to form questions without making the use of subject-verb inversion rule. The following are the instances of the absence of subject-verb inversion noticed in this study.

- How you are spending your time? (ICE)
- Why they should produce two boys of disparate characteristics? (KC)

- Madam, when he is leaving? (RCE)
- Why tourism is no relaxation? (*The Maharashtra Herald*, 21 Feb. 2008, p.6).
- Despite the HC fatwa on cows, how many you want to count on the main roads of Delhi? (Kalra: *University Today*, 15 April, 2006, p.1)

These examples reveal that in Indian English in both yes-no questions and wh-questions, there is a tendency of not using the subject-verb inversion rule. In British English, in case of yes-no questions, sometimes the subject-verb inversion rule is not followed in informal contexts. However, in Indian English, this pattern commonly occurs in formal contexts, and it seems that the frequency of this pattern is more in Indian English. In British English, except when the question word is the subject of the sentence, wh-questions are never asked without the subject-verb inversion. On the other hand, the tendency of not using the subject-verb inversion rule in wh-questions has also been observed in this study.

Another tendency observed in case of wh-questions and yes-no questions is the omission of the auxiliary 'do'. The following examples illustrate this point.

- You know the answer or not? (Chetan Bhagat, 'Five Point Someone: What not to do at IIT', p.139)
- You like the fun? (All India Radio, 26 September, 2012. 8.15 p. m)
- What you value more? (ICE)
- What you feel about the first four lines of the poem? (RCE)

- What you think of small grounds for international cricket? (Manjrekar, Ten Sports Channel, 18 May, 2006, 7.45 p.m)

The omission of 'do' in interrogative sentences can be traced to the pattern existing in Indian languages. For example, in Hindi, there is no equivalent of the auxiliary 'do' and so perhaps due to mother tongue interference, 'do' is frequently omitted in Indian English.

In British English, the declarative question is identical in form to a statement, except for the final rising question intonation. The use of such type of questions is also observed in Indian English; for example, "Pope travelled to Brazil without passport?" (*The Times of India*, 1 June, 2007, p. 15).

In British English, declarative questions are generally used only in informal situations. However, in Indian English, we find relaxation of rule restriction, as such questions are frequently used in formal contexts. In addition, it seems that the distinction between embedded and non-embedded interrogatives is not maintained in Indian English. For example, 'He asked me would I come for the picnic.' Thus, as in British English, embedding in Indian English is generally not accomplished by the use of 'if' or 'whether'.

British English has a complex system of rules to generate question tags. In Indian English, the commonly used question tags are 'isn't it' and 'no'. The following examples prove this point.

- He has left for Mumbai, isn't it? (RCE)
- It is a well developed place, no? (ICE)
- You will reach Poona at four, isn't it? (KC)

In British English, a question like 'Didn't you join the class' is answered by saying 'Yes, I did', or 'No, I didn't'. In Indian English it is common to respond to such a question by saying 'Yes, I didn't'. British teachers have pointed out that a pattern of this kind leads to a lot of ambiguity.

Attitudes towards Indian English

Ten British and Indian teachers were asked to fill up the questionnaire in order to get their views on Indian English as a variety. It was observed that most Indian teachers labeled the variety that they speak as 'British English' due to the prestige attached to it. On the other hand, British teachers had a more tolerant attitude towards Indian English. When asked as to what they felt about a sentence like 'You want a glass of water?' they pointed out that they did not form a question in that way, but had no problem if Indians deviated from British

English. It is felt that attitude plays an important role in language growth and decay, and so Indians must give recognition to the variety that they speak.

Conclusion

This study reveals some deviations with respect to question formation between British English and Indian English. There is a close relationship between the distinctive patterns in Indian English and the core grammar of British English. The various patterns of interrogatives are related to and extend from the patterns in British English. However, in the absence of a comprehensive grammar of Indian English, Standard Indian English is not a concrete reality. It is hoped that scholars would carry out research on various aspects related to the syntax of Indian English, so that the task of standardization could be taken up at the earliest.

References

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