

Malayali - English Pronunciation: With Special Reference to the Impact of Spelling

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Introduction

There are more than thirty major languages in the Indian social milieu. The educated sections of the speakers of India's 'national languages' constitute the Indian English bilinguals who use English as their so called second language (L₂). When one learns a second language after acquiring the first language, features of the first language interferes with aspects of the second language. This is called L₁ interference or negative transfer. As the major languages of India have distinct features, the kind of English spoken by speakers of these languages, due to L₁ interference, acquires special features as is evident from such terms as Hindi-English (Hinglish), Tamil-English (Tamilish), Malayalam-English (Manglish) etc. These terms, though pejorative, point to the existence of a number of English 'accents' in the country. An 'accent' implies a particular style/ way of pronunciation. The pronunciation of English by Indian English bilinguals, being modelled on the pronunciation of their mother tongues (L₁) often come under the influence of the pronunciation patterns of the speaker's mother tongue.

This is because most of the Indian languages are phonetic in the sense that all written letters (graphemes) are pronounced. Besides, the iteration (stress) system is syllable timed. This is so in the case of Malayalam which is a Dravidian language. In it all written letters are pronounced with syllable timed stress system. So, in Malayali English speakers resort to 'spelling-pronunciation', giving equal stress to all sounds, parts of words, words and even sentences.

Spelling-influenced pronunciation is the primary affective variable of Malayali English 'accent'. It affects mutual intelligibility in contexts of communication outside Kerala. Consequently, in national and international domains of English speech Malayali English negatively correlates with communication success: spelling-influenced Malayali English pronunciation is a communication barrier that produces communication handicap in Malayali English bilinguals. In employment situations, especially during recruitment drives, this handicap would become an economic handicap when Keralite job aspirants are marginalised in the selection process, due to their 'poor English'. And so, an examination of the impact of spelling on the pronunciation of Malayali English is significant and relevant as it would help in minimising the impact of spelling-pronunciation, thereby, maximizing the intelligibility of M.E out-side Kerala. Besides, insights obtained from the study can be replicated elsewhere and put to good use in the ELT class-rooms across the country.

A perusal of studies pertaining to interference shows that this aspect has been studied internationally by linguists like Swain and Barik (1978), Kenworthy (1987), Major (1987), Swan and Smith (1987), Taylor (1993) and Carter and Nunan (2004).

A number of studies have been carried out in India pertaining to the pronunciation of English in the country. Studies by Kachru (1965) Pattanayak (1969, 1981), Verma (1978), Prabhu (1987) and Tickoo (2009) have attempted to highlight features of General Indian English.

Studies by Asari (1970), Nazareth (1990), Syamala (1983,1996), and Thomas (2002, 2011, 2011a, 2011b) have attempted to indicate some aspects of L₁ sound interference on

English pronunciation of Keralites. But there is a shortage of specific studies on the impact of spelling on the pronunciation in Malayali English. Hence, the need for the present study.

Methodology

A study of the English pronunciation of 400 undergraduate students (17-20 age group; arts/ science/ commerce students; both sexes) selected through stratified random sampling from the Central Travancore Colleges has been undertaken. The members of the sample were required to pronounce selected words and sentences. The students' pronunciation was recorded by English teachers. Thus, through recorded pronunciation and participant observation (direct listening) the data was collected and subjected to further study.

Results

Analysis of the data indicates that the impact of spelling on the pronunciation in M.E. can be grouped under: Pronunciation of silent letters, gemination or pronunciation of double letters, pronunciation of some nouns/ adjectives and verbs without stress shift, spelling Pronunciation of the phonologically conditioned Plural '-es/s' and past tense '-ed' morphemes and strong articulation of weak function class words

I) Pronunciation of silent letters

Seven letters which are silent in the R.P Pronunciation of some words have been found to be pronounced in M.E.:

- Silent 'd' is Pronounced in M.E. Eg: *adjourn* /ə'dʒɜ:n / - [M.E ə'ddʒɜ:n], *adjudge* /ə'dʒʌdʒ/ [ə'ddʒʌdʒ]. Similarly /d/ in the following words are pronounced in M.E: *adjudicate* [ə'ddʒu:di.ke:t], *adjudication* [ə'ddʒu:di'ke:ʃn], *badge* [bæddʒ], *badger* [bæddʒ.ə], *bridge* [briddʒ], *bridgehead* ['briddʒ.hed], *budge* [bʌddʒ], *budget* ['bʌddʒ.et], *cudgel* ['kʌddʒ.əl], *dodge* [doddʒ], *dredge* [dreddʒ], *edge* [eddʒ], *fridge* [friddʒ], *fudge* [fʌddʒ], *gadget* ['gæddʒ.et], *hedge* [hedddʒ], *hedgehog* ['hedddʒ.hog], *judge* [dʒʌddʒ]
- Pronunciation of 'b' occurs in *bomb* /bɒm / - [bɒmb] and *comb* /kəʊm / - [ko:mb]. Other examples include *crumb* [krʌmb], *crummy* ['krʌmb.i], *debt* [debt], *honeycomb* ['hʌn.i.ko:mb], *indebted* [m'deɪt.ed] etc.
- The letter 'h' is pronounced in M.E. in *annihilate* /ə'nai.i.leɪt / - [ə'n.i.hile:t] and *honour* /'ɒn.ə / - [ho:n.ə]. Similarly, *honest* ['ho:n.est], *dishonest* [dɪ'sho:n.est], *honorable* ['ho:n.ə.r.ə.bəl], *vehicle* ['vehi.kəl] etc.
- 't' is pronounced in M.E. in *ballet* ['bæ.lət], *christen* ['krist.ən], *Christendom* ['krist.ən.dəm], *christening* ['krist.ən.ɪŋ], *gourmet* ['gor.met], *mortgage* [mort.ge:dʒ], *mortgagee* [mort.ge:dʒi], *tarot* ['tæ.rət] etc.
- Silent 'k' is pronounced in *victual* /'vɪt.əl / - ['vɪktʃu.əl]. 'G' is pronounced in *poignant* /'pɔɪ.njənt / - ['poi.gnent], and *vignette* /vɪ'njet / - [vig'net].
- Silent 'p' is pronounced in *corps* [ko:ɪps], *coup* [ku:p], *cupboard* ['kʌpb.o:d] and *receipt* [rɪ'si:pt].

II) Gemination or Pronunciation of double letters

The sounds /p/, /l/, /m/, /n/, and /k/ are given double articulation when they occur twice in spelling:

- Doubling of /p/ occurs in *apparatus* [ə'p.p.a r'e.təs], *apparel* [ə'p.pær.əl], *apparition* [ə'p.p.a r'iʃ.ən], *append* [ə'p.pend] etc.

- b) Gemination of /l/ occurs in **brilliant** ['brill.i.ənt], **brilliance** ['brill.i.ən.s], **bullet** ['bull.et], **bullock** ['bull.ok], and **bully** ['bull.i]
- c) Summation of /m/ is common in M.E: eg: **commemorate** [kə'mmem.ə|re:t], **commence** [kə'mmen.s], **commend** [kə'mmend], **commensurate** [kə'mmen.sr.e:t] **commission** [kə'mmiʃ.ən], **committee** [kə'mmət.i].
- d) Gemination of /n/ is found in **innate** [ɪ'ne:t], **innocent** [ɪ'nne.sənt], **innocuous** [ɪ'nno.ku.əs], **innovate** [ɪ'nno.ve:t], **innumerable** [ɪ'nnju:.mərə.bəl].
- e) Doubling of /k/ is heard in **occult** ['okk.ʌlt], **occupy** ['okk.u.pai], **occupation** [okk.u'pe:ʃən], **occupational** [okk.u'pe:ʃən.əl], **occlusion** [okklu:.ʃən], **occupancy** [okk.u.pən.si], **occur** [okker] etc.

III) Pronunciation of words without stress shift

In the R.P some words which are used as nouns/ adjectives and verbs have the same spelling but different pronunciation, with a shift in stress based on their changed function. But in Malayali English the words are pronounced alike, irrespective of their change in function: eg:

| Word | Noun / adj. | Verb | M.E. |
|----------|-------------|-----------|-----------|
| absent | 'æb.sənt | æb'sent | 'absent |
| abstract | 'æb.strækt | æb'strækt | abs'trakt |
| accent | 'æk.sənt | ək'sent | 'aksənt |
| addict | 'æd.ɪkt | əd'ɪkt | ʌdɪkt |
| record | 'rek.ə:d | rɪ'kə:d | re'kord |

IV) Spelling Pronunciation of the phonologically conditioned Plural –‘es/s’ and past tense – ‘ed’ morphemes

In Malayali English the Pronunciation of the plural morpheme [-es/s] is always /-s/ unlike in the R.P. which has three distinct phonologically conditioned morphemes, as in **Roses** - /r əʊzɪz/, **dogs** - /dɔgz/, **looks** - /luks/ which are pronounced as [rɔ:ses, dɔ:gz & luks] respectively in M.E.

The past tense morpheme -‘ed’ is always pronounced /d/ in Malayali English unlike in the R.P. which has three distinct phonologically conditioned morphemes, as in **rooted** - /ru:tɪd/, **rubbed** - /rʌbd/ and **looked** - /lukt/, which are pronounced as [ru:ted, rʌbd and lukt] respectively in M.E. This is because the morpheme distinction is not marked in spelling.

V) Strong articulation of weak function class words

In Malayali English, weakly articulated function class words in the R.P. are spoken in their strong forms. Eg: the sentence ‘I am coming’ - /aɪm 'kʌmɪŋ/ is pronounced as [aɪ am 'kʌmɪŋ]. Similarly ‘can I go?’ - /kənai 'gəʊ/ - [kjan ai go:]. This strong articulation of function class words is due to the absence of weak articulation markers in spelling.

It is clear from the above account that the impact of spelling on pronunciation in M.E. manifests in the Pronunciation of silent letters, gemination or pronunciation of double letters, Pronunciation of some words without stress shift, spelling Pronunciation of the phonologically conditioned Plural (-es/s) and past tense (-ed) morphemes and in the strong articulation of weak function class words.

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