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Linguicism or Colonial Mimicry: Exploits and Explorations of English

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Abstract:

When Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (2010-2016) David Cameron contemplated if Britain is responsible for many problems of the world, the awestruck United Kingdom responded democratically. While Nick Lloyd of King's College, London, eulogized Britain's role in developing the world; Andrew Thomson from the University of Leeds felt the other way. It is obvious that Lloyd was referring to the success story of India after its independence and Thomson to Africa and the Middle East, including its erstwhile Asian colonies. It is pertinent to inquire whether we (Indians) faced any ethnic penalties in the domains of education, governance, employment, and societal well-being due to colonial legacy. Tomes on Indian colonial history and practicing contemporary postcolonial culture makes it possible to interrogate the globalization of the English. There is no doubt about the Indian influence on world literature, thanks to the rise of Orientalism. This paper attempts to focus on the multiple roles of English language in India in the light of linguicism and colonial mimicry.

Keywords: English, hegemony, linguicism, globalization, decolonization.

Skutnabb-Kangas defines linguicism as follows:

“ideologies, structures and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, regulate

and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language.” (1988, p. 13) More broadly, linguicism, also known as linguistic discrimination or linguistic racism, is the discrimination or prejudice based on an individual's language or linguistic background. In India, linguicism is a complex and multifaceted issue due to the country's linguistic diversity. India is known for its vast array of languages and dialects, with over 19,500 distinct languages or dialects spoken, according to the 2011 Census of India.

Some key aspects of linguicism in India include:

- 1. Language Hierarchy:** India has a complex language hierarchy, with Hindi and English often holding a dominant position in government, education, and media. This can lead to discrimination against speakers of other languages, particularly those who do not speak Hindi or English.
- 2. Regional Linguicism:** In various Indian states, there are linguistic tensions and conflicts based on language identity. For example, the Dravidian-Sanskritic language divide in South India and linguistic tensions in states like Assam and Karnataka.
- 3. Language-Based Stereotypes:** Speakers of certain languages may face stereotypes and discrimination; such as being perceived as less educated or less cultured due to their linguistic background.
- 4. Access to Education and Employment:** Language can be a barrier to education and employment opportunities, especially for speakers of non-dominant languages. Many job advertisements and educational institutions prefer candidates proficient in specific languages, often Hindi or English.
- 5. Language Policies:** The Indian government has a history of language policies that have faced resistance and controversy, such as adopting Hindi as the official language, leading to protests and demands for linguistic equality.
- 6. Marginalization of Indigenous Languages:** Many indigenous languages in India are endangered due to the dominance of major languages and the neglect of indigenous cultures. This contributes to the erosion of linguistic diversity.

7. Cultural Identity: Language is closely tied to cultural identity, and discrimination based on language can lead to a loss of cultural heritage and a sense of alienation for minority language speakers.

Efforts have been made to address these issues, including the recognition of several languages under the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution and the promotion of mother tongue-based multilingual education through the New Education Policy (NEP 2020). However, linguicism in India remains a complex and persistent issue that requires ongoing efforts to promote linguistic diversity and combat discrimination based on language.

History tells us that India was very diverse in terms of languages, traditions, and cultures. We are given to understand that communal, religious, spiritual, and imperial movements have tried to unify these divergences and project a homogenous identity to the outside world. Some compelling modern examples that we come across from Western writing are misidentifying people of this country as Hindus with a common code of religious, cultural, and spiritual practice often the best instrument of measure being the exclusive unique caste system. However, voices of linguistic injustice to the southern Indians, indiscriminate funding to the north Indians, discrimination of Northeastern Indians, marginalization of backward states, religious intolerance, moral policing and more recently gender inequality are frequently heard in national circles. One may wonder how India became a successful country. One will not be surprised to note that the Constitution of India did not declare any of the 18 major languages of 1950 as a National Language. Was it a historical blunder or a well-planned conciliation with English?

In short linguicism in India can be attributed to the following reasons.

1. **Diverse History of India:** It is important to acknowledge India's rich diversity in terms of languages, traditions, and cultures. Over the centuries, various communal, religious, spiritual, and imperial movements have attempted to unify this diversity and project a more homogeneous identity to the outside world.
2. **Misconceptions of Homogeneity:** Western writings have often misidentified the people of India as Hindus with a common code of religious, cultural, and spiritual practice, often erroneously using the caste system as a measuring tool. This reflects a common misconception about the complexity of India's social and cultural fabric.
3. **Linguistic Injustice and Discrimination:** Linguistic injustice, such as the discrimination faced by South Indians, the unequal funding distribution to North Indians, discrimination

against Northeastern Indians, and the marginalization of economically backward states. These are issues related to language and regional disparities.

4. **The Role of English:** It is important to reconsider how India became a successful country and how English played a significant role. It is important to understand whether India's success is due to English. Also the Constitution of India did not declare any of the 18 major languages of 1950 as a National Language, raising the possibility of a historical blunder or a conciliation with English.
5. **Worship of English:** The existence of a shrine to the Goddess of English built by a Dalit community, reflects the reverence for the language. This leads to the question of why English is so highly regarded in India.
6. **Multilingual Nature of India:** The idea of whether India's multilingual nature was undermined by the endorsement of "one nation, one language" and whether English contributed to the creation of a new national identity will help in understanding linguicism in India in a better way.
7. **Impact of English in Different Regions:** English has been particularly influential in Northeastern and non-Hindi-speaking states.
8. **Historical Context and Lord Macaulay:** The historical context that credits (or discredits) Lord Macaulay needs to be revisited for giving hegemonic status to English in India. The intentions behind the colonial language policy and its consequences for the Indian population will help in this regard.
9. **Linguicism and Colonial Mimicry:** The concepts of "linguicism" and "colonial mimicry," highlight how language policies were used by colonizers to exert power and deny ethnic languages a place in global scientific and intellectual pursuits.
10. **The Significance of English in India:** The impact of the lack of knowledge of English on the majority of people in India, including issues related to medical instructions, government forms, and access to various services, is still prominent.
11. **Contemporary Status of English:** The statistics on the number of English speakers in India and the role of English in various aspects of Indian society, including sports, where English trainers and tutors are in high demand during international events, indicates the significance of English.

Many intellects attribute India's success to the English language. I wonder how many of us disagree with this notion. Are you aware of a shrine to the Goddess of English? Yes, in

February 2011, a Dalit community of Banka village in Lakhimpur Kheri district of Uttar Pradesh built it.

Why do we worship English? Did it endorse “one nation, one language”, undermining the multilingual nature of India? In the process, did it create a new imagined national identity? While Tamil, Kannada, Hindi, and other languages are competing for the status of a national language, it is interesting to note that very quietly, English has circumvented this debate and positioned itself firmly performing the dual roles of a national and an international language. Northeastern states of India very strongly demonstrate that it is indeed English that is doing the trick for them. Can we extend the matrix to include non-Hindi speaking states? Even the 2003 prediction of economist Jean Derez that “in big cities, it is [English is] more or less over and within 10 to 15 years government schools will be almost wiped out” was proved wrong. While the Hindi language policy failed owing to the ‘geolinguistic dynamics,’ English saw a sustainable development. On a lighter side, present-day English serves us today what Sanskrit did in medieval India.

David Crystal said that “English is in the right place at the right time.” Should it be viewed as an accidental happening? We can trace the role of English in its evolution as a global language in a beautiful analysis by Prof Kachru. He divided the English world into three circles – Inner, Outer and Expanding. The inner circle comprised countries claiming English as their native tongue, namely Britain, Ireland, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The outer circle includes commonwealth countries and British colonies, while the expanding circle has countries like China and other non-colonial countries. India is in the outer circle where English made rapid strides to become a second language. The credit (or discredit?) goes to Lord Macaulay for giving hegemonic status to English in India. His wording reflects the power exercised by the colonizer to deny ethnic languages any chance to participate in global scientific and intellectual pursuits. The resulting colonial language policy is often misunderstood by many Indians as an instrument to overcome caste discrimination in the country. If it is true that we were under colonial rule for more than two centuries, why was education not given its due importance in India? Apart from religious conversions, what effects were made by the colonizers to improve the social well-being of the natives? What was the percentage of the English-speaking population in India at the time when the doctrine of Macaulay was implemented? Was it 5 or 6%? This imposition, according to Philipson, led to ‘linguicism’ – the unequal division of power based on language. The consequent growth of the

English language in India is referred to as ‘colonial mimicry’ by Homi Bhabha. He calls Macaulay’s ‘Minute’ an ‘absurd extravagance’.

Sahith Aula shares the common concern of intellectuals like Homi Bhabha that “it is incomprehensible that the majority of people in India are being oppressed by the mere lack of knowledge of a language. By not having medical instructions, food ingredient labels and nutritional information, government forms, access to the courts and politicians, street signs, and even movie tickets in their mother tongue, they are being harmed in the most discriminatory of manners.” An article in Forbes magazine, *Capital Flows* (2014) claims that less than 30% of Indians can speak or write in English. India has a population of 1,212,730,519 (1.2 billion), out of which 1,210,854,977, speak 121 languages (22 specified and 99 not specified languages in the Eighth Schedule to the Indian Constitution) and 270 mother tongues, the balance of 1,875,542 (1.8 million, i.e. 0.15%) are speakers of other languages than those included in Scheduled and Non Scheduled languages of India. Several Indian languages are supported by strong electronic and print media, medium of education, film, entertainment, information and broadcasting. This makes India the largest functioning multilingual country in the world.

Given the magnitude of the Indian population, the number of people who have problems with the English language runs into several hundreds of millions. As per the Census of India 2011 report, only 259678 people claim English as their L1. Dylan Lyons, in his survey on English speakers in the world, claimed that out of 7.5 billion people, 1.5 billion speak English, of which 150 million are from India.

India is in the league with nations that are ready to impose English language learning at the slightest of hints. Let us look at games, just as we look at food and books as popular cultural products. Ever since the inception of the Olympics as a major sporting event, countries across the globe have come up with minor versions. Also, some individual games were relegated to unprecedented international levels. While the contribution of sports to the globalization concept is unquestionable, its advocacy of English is undeniable. Whenever a major sporting event is organized in a non-native English-speaking country, there is a great demand for English trainers and tutors both locally and globally to rise to the occasion. Recent sporting events held in countries like China, Russia and Korea were no exception to this phenomenon. It is as important to train the visitors in local language communication as we train the locals to communicate in English.

This growth of the English language in the sports domain may be seen as yet another example of ‘Cultural Imperialism’ with an agenda of evangelistic expansion and propagation of global trade alongside linguistic hegemony. More than assimilation, Globalization has created collisions, often resulting in the birth of new cultures. The postcolonial English culture in India is a case in point. Dalits have seen it as a language of emancipation and built a temple to the goddess of English, while regional linguistic jingoism seeks to eliminate of signboards in English. It is interesting to note Skutnabb-Kangas’ comments, ‘‘When dominant languages, like English, are learned subtractive, at the cost of the mother tongues, they become killer languages.’’

Globalization in language politics in India received a renewed interest in 2006 since Karnataka declared a new language policy promoting Kannada over English in school education. This did not go well with the emerging Indian middle class. This creates a catch-22 situation vis-a-vis the role of English in India. India produces a considerable quantity of writing in English, both in original and translated forms. Some groups strongly demand the English everywhere and others who protest it. Do we need culturally conditioned/sensitive/produced material to learn or teach English language? This question opens a Pandora’s box with a plethora of reactions.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, in the process of decolonizing and globalization of English in the Indian context, lessons provided by Economics can come in handy. The famous Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen feels that opposing globalization unconditionally is counterproductive. He further says that ‘‘it is not only counterproductive in itself; given the global interactions throughout history, it can also cause non-Western societies to shoot themselves in the foot even in their precious cultural foot.’’ One interesting market-driven fact about the electronics industry is the launch of smartphones with operating systems in multiple Indian languages alongside English. India, a multilingual pluricultural society as it were, needs divergent strategies to resist the increasing hegemony of English. Probing questions like Did English impress the European Union? and Why Brexit? might throw some new insights into cultural mimicry and linguicism. Had English been as diversified as Arabic, it would not have become a global language.

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