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English in Kerala: Plus ça change?

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Abstract

This article overviews the status, ecology, use, and the teaching/learning of English in the southern Indian state of Kerala. It does so along two overlapping dimensions. A socio-demographic dimension situates the ecology of English in Kerala in the general Indian context, and relates it to the ethno-linguistic identity of Kerala. A second applied linguistic dimension tries to explore some of the distinctive features of English taught and used in Kerala, and comments on the prevailing institutionalised praxis of the teaching and learning of English in schools and colleges, leading on to some educational, functional, social and communicational implications intra- and internationally.

Introduction

The tradition of defining communities in terms of national rather than ethno-linguistic identities, though econo-politically convenient, can be confusing at best and misleading at worst in large parts of the world, where political, ethnic and linguistic preferences, loyalties, and identities not only fail to merge comfortably but also signify different levels of engagement. Perhaps nowhere is this truer than with India, which in most discourses and domains is generalised deceptively as one entity. Often, pronouncements about various aspects of the role and learning of English in some part(s) of India will easily be read as generalisable to the whole sub-continent despite explicit caveats (for example, Sheorey & Dies, 1997; Ramanathan, 1999). The need to underscore the significance of the vast internal diversity within that one country becomes pertinent when looking at the engagement with English, particularly in matters of literacy, education, communication and public participation.

There is general pan-Indian consensus about some aspects of the presence and use of English in India as a whole: it is more active in urban than in rural areas; it is more accessible to the upper classes; it is more valued and preserved in "the South" than in "the North"; and that it is generally still (used as) a symbol of power, prestige, and social mobility. As an English-using ESL1 community (see Nayar, 1997), Indians also share some basic roles and functions for it in their public life:

1. English has a prominent role in their (higher) education system, particularly in both its mathetic and didactic functions.[1]
2. English is highly visible in the country's print media and knowledge industry.
3. English is used as a communicative medium nationally and inter-ethnically.
4. English is perceived as the essential tool for global communicative participation, particularly electronically.
5. English works as a sociolinguistic marker for status, power, and authority.

There are also perhaps some nationally shared features with reference to the teaching of English, a least in the formal, institutional sector of English education. First, English is still treated and taught as a "subject" in the school curriculum rather than as a serious communicative tool. Second, the educational system is somewhat rigidly bureaucratic, and all matters of policy and implementation, including teaching material are "prescribed" from above. The teaching/learning context is not friendly to the teacher's inventiveness or pedagogic initiatives. Third, arising from the above two factors is the fact that at least at the scholastic level, the *de facto* objective of teaching/learning is not to develop any kind of ability or competence in the language but merely to fulfil the academic requirement of enabling the students to obtain passing grades in the centrally set examinations. Fourth, most institutions have such a high teacher-student ratio that teachers often have to talk at the students rather than to or with them. Finally most of the teachers are what they are, not necessarily by free career choice, but mainly because it is a job they were lucky enough to secure, which is not to say that they are inadequately trained or prepared.

It is in this context that we should look at the "what and how" of English in the state of Kerala. Constitutionally, education as a governmental responsibility has been devolved to the various state governments, with minimal involvement of the central federal government. This then automatically implies that in some measure the actual educational policies, allocation of funds, administrative practices, organisational elements, and eventually the finished products of the educational institutions might show considerable if not substantial variation from state to state, particularly when the state assemblies are run by different political parties with different political, social, and educational agendas.

In terms of area (approximately 39,000 square kilometres) and population (around 31 million, discounting employment emigrants outside the state), Kerala is one of the smaller states; however, it would like to claim for itself, perhaps justifiably, a unique status in more ways than one. So what then are some of the features contributing to this sense of "God's Own Country" uniqueness? It is one of the most densely populated states of India (820 people per square kilometre, three times denser than India as a whole) with little industrial base for its economy. However, its standard and quality of life are such that Kerala now attracts large numbers of immigrant labourers from other states. Having made history by installing the world's very first democratically elected communist government, the state has continued to have its political thinking and legislature heavily influenced by the communist party for the last five decades. The state also has a reputation for being politically informed as well

as volatile. In addition, despite global warming, Kerala's lush tropical ecology, highland spice estates, and long coastline interspersed by calm lagoons continue to attract tourists.

Culturally, demographically and ethno-linguistically, too, Kerala has some uniqueness. The Malayalees are essentially a Dravidian people with an Indo-Aryan sense of history and identity. Malayalam, a Dravidian language and originally a dialect of Tamil, branched out and developed with an independent identity around 1,500 years ago with extensive Sanskritisation. (For some ethno-social implications of this, see Nayar, 1991). The main three traditional festivals of Kerala are virtually unknown elsewhere in India, even across its border states. Many pan-Indian festivals, though not unfamiliar, are not celebrated in Kerala. The traditional Hindu system of four castes is diluted such that only the top and the bottom are clearly identifiable while the middle two have been reclassified into a maddeningly complex, amorphous maze. The "Nair" community in the middle, traditionally (though perhaps not today) the most dominant in society, is matrilineal, which is very rare elsewhere in India. Demographically, Kerala has a much higher proportion, presence, profile, and socio-political participation of Muslims (24% of population) and Christians (20% of population) in public spheres. It may still be the one place in the world where temples, mosques, and churches of all denominations coexist peacefully within a stone's throw of each other, and where ethnic "Malayalee" loyalties override religious separatism.

Kerala boasts a literacy rate comparable to the developed nations of the world. It is likely that all the above ethno-socio-cultural features have contributed to this educational achievement in Kerala. For instance, the high presence of Christian missions has contributed to the spread and availability of education, particularly English education (English-medium institutions are still popularly referred to as 'convent schools' regardless of affiliation!). Schools and colleges originally started by various missions are even today powerful vertebrae in the spine of the (English) educational system, as well as motivators for institutions of a similar nature by other organisations. And, since the first communist government in the fifties, schooling has been both compulsory and free in Kerala. There are no reliable statistics available specifically about the English literacy, or English proficiency and competence of Malayalam speakers compared to those of other states, but considering the significant trend among educated Malayalees to seek and find a life and career in urban areas outside the state as well as overseas, its English literacy too must be among the highest in India.

The overwhelming presence and entrenchment of English in Kerala's public life is evident to visitors. Even in rural areas, hoardings, sign boards and the nameplates of shops and services are all primarily in English (even when the clientele are unlikely to be English literate), apparently irrelevant and seemingly insensitive to their actual intelligibility to the public at large. It is as though English is free to infiltrate any aspect of public life, and its use symbolically endorses the credibility and authenticity of any product or establishment.

This superstratum socio-economic status of English is so self-evident that urban apartment buildings and housing complexes in Kerala have names like *Sea Winds, Rowan Park, Riverine, Orchid Meadow, Exotica, Buckingham Court,* etc. Even where name and billboards are bilingual, English has priority over Malayalam. Malayalam words and names are often written in the English script more often than English words are written in Malayalam. Like most Indians, the Malayalees too reduce their names to initials that represent their English spellings and not their Malayalam orthography. There is a double shuffle when local organisations in Kerala with Malayalam names are abbreviated into (English) alphabetic initials and those initials are then written in the Malayalam syllabic script in the print media. Such overwhelming entrenchment of written English is perhaps an indication that any Malayalee who has had basic schooling is at least able to decode English writing.

A word or two about the nature of the linguistic ethnography and the nature of actual English language used locally might be relevant here as it is an indirect reflection of both the product and process of English acquisition. It is also visualised as "normal" English by the English-educated Keralites. I shall stay clear as much as possible of the sociolinguistic controversies of the hegemonic (Phillipson, 1992) versus poly-model (Kachru, 2005) tension and keep a neutral line (see Pennycook, 2007). Apart from the native language Malayalam, most Keralites will have varying degrees of (at least passive) interactive ability in one or two other Indian languages (Tamil through contiguity and Hindi for political reasons as well as Bollywood), and at least some knowledge *about* if not *of* English. All will have studied at least three languages at some stage in their schooling. However, most *educated* Keralites will have enough communicative ability in English, more passive than active, and more in writing than in fluent speaking. Thus, all Malayalees intuitively have multilingual and cross-linguistic susceptibilities, which make the learning and use of English fit comfortably into their overall language schema,

Like that of most non-native speakers, the English of most Malayalees has its own characteristic features. Some typical phonological characteristics (different from other versions of Indian English) are: the tendency to voice all post-nasal stops, neutralising the difference between pairs like 'ankle/angle', 'ample/amble', 'ante/Andy', and 'winching/whingeing'; the total absence of the phonemes [z] and [Ž] and an apparent total lack of word stress as a dimension of word identity. There is virtually no weakening of syllables and all words are pronounced as they would be if they were written in Malayalam. However, what makes the spoken English of Kerala unique—affecting even pan-Indian intelligibility—is its characteristic rattle-tumble rhythm, which northerners often make fun of by comparing it to pebbles shaken in a tin. To an outsider who may depend on sentence intonation and end-weight-focus pitch pattern for processing of information structure, the rhythm, flow and intonation of the Malayalee's spoken English makes hard work until familiarised.

Despite the preference for English as the medium of instruction in some schools and all institutions of higher education, its communicative use is more or less restricted to the public domain. Like many other English-using Indian communities, the

Malayalees are ethnocentric about their English and often ridicule other Indians for the faults and foibles of their English. While there are not many Malayalam expressions that have penetrated into the Malayalee's abstraction of what English is, there are several words and expressions of English origin that have been assimilated into Malayalam and then "reincarnated" into Kerala English, which may not make sense to outsiders. Interestingly, as these are English words and have long entrenchment, the average local has no reason to suspect their semantic opacity to others. Three interesting examples of popular Kerala English expressions are the ubiquitous sign 'Cool Bar' (the stalls that sell chilled non-alcoholic drinks), 'stepney' (the spare wheel of a vehicle), and 'portion' (syllabus material).

As in many parts of India, written English, particularly in the bureaucratic domain, can still bear evidence of the "colonial lag," notwithstanding globalisation through the electronic media. There is, unsurprisingly, less stylistic and registral variation than in first language use, and so where English is used for communication, it might appear to be somewhat bookish and formal, giving credibility to Das Gupta's (1993) "combat gear" syndrome. A line from a personal letter (from a well-educated bank vice-president) to a very close family member about a family charity, for instance, reads: "As per our discussions before, what is deemed most conducive.... Any contribution towards this cause will go a long way in making this venture a grand success" (Author's personal communication).

Precise Latinate words are more in parlance than simple English phrasal verbs, even in informal situations ('submit' for 'hand in', 'expire' for 'pass away' and so on). Conscious code shifting is common in speech for various social reasons (establishing status, guise, credibility, role relationship, authority, power, etc.) and in writing for registral reasons. (see Nayar, 2005; Sridhar, 2002). It is common for English language newspapers to have mixed code headlines and texts as the following examples from *The Hindu* illustrate:

> **Thiruabharanam procession on; To reach sannidhanam Monday (13/01/08)**
>
> **Brahman is Nirguna in the advaita tradition and has to be experienced as the Atman within. But Brahman is also saguna called Ishwara. (11/01/08)**

For the educated middle class Malayalee, a mixture of English and Malayalam is the unmarked code of informal interaction (see Scotton, 1993), where the use of Malayalam alone will appear non-spontaneous if not inadequate, and the use of English alone will certainly be interpreted as arrogant and "show-offish." The matrix code and embedded codes will keep shifting, depending upon the domain and register of the discourse. This fact may be consequentially implicated with the acquisition of English in that incorporating chunks of pre-fabricated English structures does not involve independent, extended ideation in it. The important thing, however, is that the Malayalees are secure with their version of English and are unconcerned about its

disputable authenticity as good "proper" English. They also appear to have communicative adequacy in their own local contexts.

Such a contemporary profile, though of limited etiological use, will provide some a posteriori analytical explicability for the teaching and learning of English in Kerala. The state schooling system of ten years plus two is divided into Lower Primary, Upper Primary, Secondary and Higher Secondary levels. All schools and colleges are run by both public and private sectors. Private sector schools mostly have English as the medium of instruction as well as a subject, while public sector schools teach mainly through Malayalam but introduce English as a subject (at least five hours a week) by the time the children get to Upper Primary level. Thus, all children will have been exposed to English at least as a subject for six years before they leave school after grade 10, and for eight years when they reach university. A total of 12,310 schools were recorded in 2000, of which 2,580 were secondary schools, and 931 were Higher secondary schools (Pre-degree), with a total intake of 65,600 students.[2]

The English-teaching situation in Kerala schools is far from ideal, and is a saga of crowded and ill-equipped classrooms, stretched, stressed, and unmotivated teachers, confused but examination-driven students, unsympathetic bureaucratic rigidity, inflexible curriculum material based on tradition rather than practicality, and an evaluation system that tests rote memory of text material rather than actual language ability. According to Manjooran:

> The situation is pathetic. The plight of an English teacher trying to teach a difficult textbook to a crowded classroom of mixed ability students can be miserable if his sincere intention is to teach them the language and not the text book, for the examination at the end of the year hangs like the sword of Damocles, ready to shatter his good intentions, with its time bound threat. Sadly, the situation does not warrant any sweeping reformatory changes in the immediate future. The teacher is stuck with text book teaching, so to say, and the learners of L2 miss the most important point of the whole process of learning a second language, that is the absorption of, and awareness of the target language as a whole. (1997, p. 3)

However, there are winds of change that indicate a serious effort to make the system more pragmatic and more sensitive to the requirements of modern day English proficiency. According to the website of the State Council of Educational Research and Training of the government of Kerala, [http://www.scert.kerala.gov.in], the English curriculum, as well as the evaluation strategies, were revised in 1997, and all teachers were given the necessary in-service training. The need for evolving "a dynamic model of English teaching" with "an indigenous approach based on our own needs" was also stressed. About four years ago, a revised testing system was introduced as well. There was a recent press report about a quasi-governmental body called the District Centre for English organising training programmes for English teachers (*The Hindu* 31/03/08). Additionally, judging from the nature of the state-wide

school leaving examination, the nature, approach and orientation of the curriculum, though still somewhat based on knowledge of the content of the "prescribed" texts, show some evidence of the need to make English instruction more sensitive to real-life communicative needs. There are efforts to test general language and communicative skills in terms of productive use and not necessarily memory-based regurgitation (assuming that the exam tests what was (to be) taught). An expert's comments on the new exam paper say that the exam appeared sincere in its effort to ensure that the evaluation reflected target objectives. However, the questions in the exam (apart from containing evaluatory imperfections, and even language errors) have apparently failed to get student support or boost student confidence (*The Mathrubhoomi* 16/10/08, p. 11).

As mentioned, virtually all higher education is in English. University campuses (four comprehensive, one agricultural, one science and technology, one Sanskrit, and one management) function as the seat of administration and high level post-graduate research. All undergraduate and most post-graduate teaching takes place in the various affiliated colleges, scattered usually within a 150 Km radius of the campuses. Private bodies and organisations run most of the colleges. Crucial examinations are all prepared, administered, and marked centrally by the university and not by the (coaching) institutions. In colleges, the nature and quantity of exposure to English instruction varies, depending upon the field of study. Generally, undergraduates have English lessons for two of the three years of study and arts students have more hours and more material to go through than others.

It seems that English education at the higher levels should be much more of an issue in Kerala. For a start, it appears to be ambivalent and confused in its raison d'être, its legitimacy, and its motivation. English curriculum in the colleges in Kerala, by and large, appear to be too scared or too unmotivated to break away from the set traditions of the literary text-based mould of the pre-independence days. As Sheorey and Nayar point out: "Most students have difficulty understanding the substance of the 'prescribed' literary selections. The typical method of teaching consists of explicatory reading of the text ... and occasional discussion of grammar points" (2002, p. 18).

When very large class sizes of over a hundred are added to this, we easily see how much actual language teaching or learning can happen. Many lecturers merely toe the line alongside this "assembly line" process. Having spent a lot of money and effort along the assembly line getting their own qualifications, and having "donated" large sums of "goodwill" money under the table to secure their positions, most lecturers are unwilling to rock the boat and so trim their sails to suit the winds. Being products of the system, many lecturers also find (but will hate to admit) that their own metalinguistic knowledge of English is uncomfortably inadequate to be deviantly innovative. Besides which, there is little point in being innovative as the system is far more conducive to compliance than resistance. Manjooran observes, "The L2 learners at the college level are supposed to have learned the basics of the English language from school. It is a misconception that ten years of text book teaching with an examination-oriented approach will yield any solid language learning" (1997, p. 4).

In the three years at college, the students are not given not much of a chance to redeem themselves, either. Currently the college undergraduate, with little to poor spoken and poor to shaky written English has to cope with (along with some grammar work), a whole set of literary works including: a selection of pieces of prose (mostly British writers), a novel by Thomas Hardy, a play by Ibsen, a collection of poems, and *The Merchant of Venice* (original Shakespeare's version). The examination expects them to be familiar with the literary texts and make critical evaluations on many issues based on the texts. Most surprisingly, they manage to do this! One wonders what applied linguists and second language learning pundits will make of that.

So, there seems to be a genuine ambivalence between the teaching of language and literature to the detriment of both. While genuine competence in modern English is desired and required to enable appropriate participation in academic pursuit, career, and public life both intra- and internationally, what is actually offered is familiarity with random works of British literature, mostly up to the Georgian Age, to create no more than a certain sense of elitist buzz, or feeling of brash snobbery of literary *haut monde*. A rapid survey among college undergraduates I conducted in Kerala suggested that most had little focused sense of why they were learning or what they were taught (except that it was on the curriculum), or what purpose it served or what use it would be for them. The general discourse is that one needs to go through the English hoops for upward mobility, socially, professionally and generally.

With such an entrenched, pervasive presence of English in the public life and media, and with so many hours of classroom engagement, what is the state of the average school leavers' English language competence? Does it really meet the expectations? What indeed are the target expectations from school leavers? Does their competence really get any better after a few years in college? Is the fact that most manage to pass the examinations good enough reason for complacency? Is there any truth in the traditional cliché about the Indian English teaching scene "*plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*"? These are indeed difficult questions to answer. I am not sure there have been any serous efforts to answer them.

There are a few points one can make about English language ability and Keralites. The role of English as a social divider is perhaps less true today in Kerala than in many other parts of India, as socialistic policies and democratisation of education are bringing about rapid changes in the traditional class hierarchy. The gender ratio of school leavers and thus English literates in Kerala favours females, as there are more girls passing secondary exams than boys. The English language teaching industry in the private sector is booming, and one can find boards and ads publicising lessons in communicative English, spoken English, functional English, general English, English for Anglo-American admission requirements, and every other kind and brand of English, all over the state. The school system is slowly waking up to remedying the moribund stasis of its English learning and teaching. The higher education system, however, is still ambivalent and uncertain and looks unlikely to shift gears in the near future. Even under present conditions, many Keralites manage to be communicatively adequate if not unfaultably competent, perhaps more competitively than in many other

parts of India. Finally, there is a great deal of desire, will, and motivation to be competent in English for a variety of reasons, the most important being the need to seek careers and opportunities outside the state. A few decades ago, there was a lot of pressure from New Delhi political circles to discount English in favour of Hindi, which found most resistance in the southern states. The southern states will therefore be very happy with the resurgence of English, since it will override a possible sociolinguistic, and hence political, domination and hegemony by the Hindiwallas.

In the ultimate analysis, one cannot see any real reason for any community anywhere in the world to be perpetually concerned with improving and upgrading their English, as long as they have what it takes to participate intelligently and profitably in global life. Perhaps Anglophilia and concern over the dissemination of English, after all, is a discourse of power created and promoted by the vested interests of what Phillipson (1992) calls English "Linguicism"!

Notes

[1] I use the terms "mathetic" and "didactic" referring to the science(s) of learning and teaching, more or less in the same sense as they were used by their originator, John Amos Comenius in his work Spicilegium didacticum, first published in 1680.

[2] These figures are from the official web site of the Kerala government.

About the Author

Bhaskaran Nayar has taught English and various aspects of English communication, as well as trained ESL teachers for nearly half a century in India, Ethiopia, Papua New Guinea, Singapore, the United States and the United Kingdom. Recently retired from full time teaching, he is still affiliated with the University of Lincoln, U.K., and is currently involved with an English communication project in Kerala, funded by the University Grants Commission, New Delhi, as Consultant in Applied Linguistics. His special areas of interest are the political sociology of English in the world and cross-cultural pragmatics of English.

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