



Influence of Mother Tongue and its Impact on Spoken English of Malayali Speakers

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Abstract: A few centuries ago, English was spoken only by Elite groups and affluent people in India. Today, there are more non-native speakers than native speakers of English all over the world. English is used as an official language in over 60 countries of the world. Since it is an international language, different varieties of English are spoken around the world. The English spoken by the non-native speakers of English tends to be different from the English spoken by the native speakers. It happens because the non-native speakers of English are bi-lingual or multi-lingual. Therefore, dialectical variations become an integral part of the English language articulated by the non-native speakers of English. This paper attempts to focus on the influence of the Indian language, Malayalam on the Global language, English. Mother tongue influence leads to grammatical, syntactical and pronunciation errors in the target language. This study also focuses on how to tackle this universal problem and also hints some remedies which can be effectively utilized for learning the target language.

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Language is our primary source of communication. It's the method through which we share our ideas with other people. There are thousands of languages in the world. Countries have their own national languages in addition to a variety of local languages spoken and understood by their people in different regions.

This paper attempts to prove the influence of Malayalam over the international language, English. The influence is on both the languages as one uses the other whenever there is a need. The speakers of Indian languages are influenced by English and even illiterate common man uses English words in his daily conversation. In Indian context, the capability to converse in English has become an issue related to jobs and prestige.

Importance of English

The importance of English has been globally accepted. It is the only language which is being taught as second language and used as official language in almost 90 countries. English as a global language is spoken by 750 million people around the world. English was originally the language of England, but through the historical efforts of the British Empire, it has become the primary or the secondary language of many former British colonies such as United States, Canada, Australia and India. Currently, English is the primary language of not only countries actively touched by British imperialism, but also many business and cultural spheres dominated by those countries.

There are several factors that make the English language essential to communication in our current time. First of all, it is the most common foreign language. This means that when two people who come from different countries usually use English as a common language to communicate. This is also called Lingua Franca. This is why everyone needs to learn the language in order to interact at international level. Secondly, English is essential when it comes to finding jobs in government departments or multinational companies. Thirdly, English language plays an important role in the domains of education, management, commerce and political relations, judiciary, engineering and is therefore an entry to social mobility, higher education and better job opportunities.

English language empowers peoples from around the world. Internet also plays an important role in promoting English as the standard language. Through the pages of various social networks people connect with each other from anywhere in the world, mostly through English. This is because this language is accepted worldwide. In India, the superiority and prestige of English over other languages of the country remain unquestioned. "India is the third largest English using population of the world, after USA and UK" states Aarti Bansal.

Varieties of Indian English

India is a country with heterogeneous languages, cultures and traditions. This characteristic of the country leads to the emergence of a number of Indian English dialects which comprises of Malayalam-English, Tamil-English, Hindi-English, Kannada-English, Bengali-English and so on. These Indian English dialects remain completely different from the British English. This dialectical English spoken in India varies depending on the socio-cultural background of an individual.

English spoken by the people of Kerala

Malayalam, the official language of Kerala, is classified as a South Dravidian language. About 31.8 million people consider Malayalam as their mother tongue. Possessing an independent written script, it also has an enriched literature. Influence of Sanskrit is most prominent in Malayalam in almost all linguistic areas. Thousands of words have found their way into Malayalam from Sanskrit.

The English used by the people of Kerala is the main subject of this study and this variety has its own characteristics. Kerala has the highest literacy rate and this means that most people of Kerala have some basic knowledge of English, which they might have acquired from their school education. But highest literacy cannot assure right pronunciation or perfect accent. In other words, literacy cannot bring about changes in the style or mode of communication.

Indian speakers of English display an accent that is totally different from the US or British pronunciation. Malayalam speakers also display an influence of their mother tongue in the English they speak. This makes their English pronunciation indecipherable to the native speakers. The different expressions and words used in English by the Indian speakers are well understood by the people within the country but the same would sound quite strange to a foreigner. This paper presents an overview of the influence of Malayalam on English in Kerala.

Reasons for mispronunciation or incorrect use of English in Kerala

Malayalam is a phonetic language and because of this reason, the pronunciation of the language is dependent upon the spelling. Therefore the speakers of Malayalam pronounce all the sounds as represented in the Malayalam script. As such, the speakers of Malayalam are accustomed to pronounce a language on the basis of how it is depicted in the script. This habituation leads them to pronounce an unphonetic language like English in the same way as it is used in the phonetic language Malayalam. Strict adherence to the usage of a phonetic language like Malayalam unknowingly forces them to apply the same standard values for an unphonetic language like English. The method of utterance of the Malayalam script forces them to apply the same rule for English pronunciation. They speak English with direct translation of Malayalam sentence in their mind. This bilingualism is easily noticed in educated native speakers of Malayalam. Moreover, native speakers of Malayalam seem to use English words in their Malayalam conversation more frequently than most other groups of language speakers in India.

Pennington and Richards point out that 'Pronunciation is largely identified with the articulation of individual sounds and to a lesser extent, with the stress and intonation patterns of the target language' (1986). As Mackay points out, a pronunciation "... error may be due to a transfer from the native language; an analogy with something correctly learned in the foreign language; a wild guess, vagueness in remembering the right form; or general lack of accuracy and language skill" (1967). The problem mostly occurs when a direct translation is made from native language to English. Most of the errors made are due to the difference in sound systems and due to the misinterpretation of spelling symbols. The ability to pronounce the structures or words is as important as the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Even the simplest words misspoken, keeps one from communicating effectively.

The following are examples of few words in English which are mispronounced by native speakers of Malayalam.

1. Uncle is pronounced as 'Ungle' (/k/ is pronounced as /g/)
2. Aunty as 'Aanty' (aandy as aanty)
3. Orange as 'Oorange' (O as Oo)
4. Coffee as 'Kooffi' (Co as Koo)
5. Hospital as 'Hoospittel' (tal as ttel)
6. Ostrich as 'Oostrich' (O as Oo)
7. Work as 'Warkku' (k as kku)
8. Jump as 'Jumb' (/p/ as /b/)
9. Campus as 'Cambus' (/p/ as /b/)
10. Simple as 'Simble' (/p/ as /b/)
11. First as 'Phast' ('f' as 'pha')
12. Breakfast as 'Breakphaast' ('fa' as 'pha')
13. Wire as 'Whyaare' (ire as aare)
14. Masala as 'Masaala' (sala as saala)
15. Sure as 'Shuvar' ('o' as 'var')
16. Lipstick as 'Lifftick' (/p/ as /f/)
17. Railway Station as 'Railway tation' ('s' is omitted)
18. Onion as 'Oonion' ('Aah' as 'Oo')
19. Occur as 'Okker' ('Akkur' as 'Okker')
20. Doctor as 'Dookter' (O as Oo)
21. Daughter as 'Dotter' (t as tt)
22. Rare as 'Rayer' ('reih' as 'rayer')
23. Best as 'Bhest' (/b/ as 'bh')
24. Auto as 'Ootto' ('O' as 'Oo')
25. Office as 'Ofees' ('ice' as 'ees')
26. Tortoise as 'Tortooise' ('tise' as 'oise')
27. Car as 'Caarr' ('r' is emphasized)
28. Flower as 'Flowerr' ('r' is emphasized)

29. College as 'Colaige' ('ege' as 'aige')
30. Motorbike as 'Mottoorbyke' (/t/ as 'tt')
31. Tap as 'Taapp' ('ap' as 'aapp')
32. Current as 'Currend' (/t/ as /d/)
33. Music as 'Myoosic' ('z' as 's')
34. Pleasure as 'Pleasurre' ('sh' as 's')
35. Zero as 'Seero' ('z' as 's')
36. Fan as 'Phaan' ('f' as 'ph')
37. Sam as 'Saam' ('z' as 's')

In the examples listed below, the silent letters are also emphasized.

1. Car as 'Caarr' ('r' is emphasized)
2. Flower as 'Flowerr' ('r' is emphasized)
3. Honour as 'Hoonour' ('h' is emphasized)
4. Plumber as 'Plumbberr' ('b' is emphasized)

The following are a few examples of sentences spoken by native speakers of Malayalam using bilingual medium even in their colloquial speech.

1. Malayalam: "Vendathu cheyyoo."
Indian English: "Please do the needful."
Standard English: "Please attend to this matter."
2. Malayalam: "Ningalude Marupadi Udan Pratheekshikkunnu"
Indian English: "Your earliest response is requested."
Standard English: "I look forward to hearing from you soon."
3. Malayalam: "Ningalude bhagathu ninnu"
Indian English: "From your side"
Standard English: "From you"
Malayalam: "Njan Riju. Njan thaamasikkunnathu Delhi yil aanu."
Indian English: "Myself Riju. I live in Delhi."
Standard English: "My name is Riju. I live in Delhi."
4. Malayalam: "Market avide aanu."
Indian English: "Market is there."
Standard English: "There is a market."
5. Malayalam: "Innu raavile"
Indian English: "Today morning"
Standard English: "This morning"

Indians usually follow a literal translation (without change in the sentence structure) from native language to the target language (English). As English language is flexible, it is changed by the speaker for convenience. The culture of local language surely interfere the target language in many aspects such as pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. Indianism refers to the way a sentence has been structured as if it was literally translated from an Indian language to English.

Indian speakers of English are bi-lingual or multi-lingual and use English as their second language. Their first language is local language or mother tongue. Although Hindi is the National language of India, use of Hindi is limited to certain places and so English occupies its place. People of Kerala also like to speak English as it is a comfortable language in speaking and in writing. In urban areas, it is very common to see that young men and women use English with their mother tongue. The problem is that they sometimes mix local language with English.

There are many typical Indian English expressions. Some of which have been discussed above. These Indian English expressions are commonly used by Indians who speak English as a second language. Non-Indians or native speakers of English who are not familiar with these words or expressions cannot understand the meanings intended by the users. It has been discovered that when languages come in contact, there is transfer of linguistic items from one language to another due to the borrowing of words" (Kachru 1989). English language has been described by Crystal as an 'insatiable borrower' (p 267).

Precision

Languages are primarily meant for communication, but one must also note that there is a way to use them to ensure adequate intelligibility or precision of the utterance generated in a conversation. While local variations of the language are often acceptable locally, it may not be the case in the outside world, because such variations make no sense to a non-Indian.

This does not mean that all utterances in English generated by Indians are correct in relation to the generally accepted Standard English around the world. Indians must realize that the so-called Indian English that they speak in India is much different from the Standard British English. The Indianisms in English result in accent errors, syntax errors and grammatical errors. The fact is that the so-called 'Indian English' is not considered correct or accepted even within India.

Remedies for the problems faced by the English speakers of Kerala

The problems faced by the native speakers of Malayalam are, of course, a common problem faced by all the people of the world. But when it comes to tackling the problem, one of the ways is to firstly comprehend and list down the differences between the two languages, the learner's language and the target language and focus on those aspects.

The real problem in using language mostly occurs when a direct translation is made from native language to English. So, effort should be made to understand the pronunciation, syntax and grammar of Standard English.

Nunan suggests that the best time for students to learn a language in order to become as native-like in their pronunciation as possible is before the onset of puberty. He describes this critical period as a 'biologically determined period of life when language can be acquired easily and beyond which language is increasingly difficult to acquire' (1999)

Practicing speaking with others is another way of learning English. The more you practice, the better and more confident you become in your vocabulary and pronunciation. Interaction with friends, reading out loud, listening to radio, watching films and BBC news are some other ways of learning English.

Conclusion

English language assumes a pivotal role in global communication. In the midst of the variety of languages around the world, the ranking of English language is the number one in the world. Indians are not native speakers of English and they can never be. But there is nothing wrong in striving for precision and trying to go as close as possible to the generally accepted norms of English. To reach the zenith of glory, proficiency in mother tongue alone will not help. For achieving this purpose, one should also respect English language as one respects one's mother tongue.

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