

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE USE OF ENGLISH BY THE INDIANS IN SOUTH AFRICA

A summary of Mrs Devamonie Bughwan's thesis for the degree D. Litt. et Phil. at the University of South Africa.

The general aim of the thesis is to investigate the use of English amongst the Indians of South Africa.

As a prelude to the investigation a brief historical account is given of the advent of Indians in Natal, South Africa, and their early background in terms of social, economic and educational standing. A division into religious and linguistic groups forms part of this introduction chiefly in order to draw attention to the multiplicity of languages and the consequent difficulty of communication between groups and between Indians as a group and White English-speaking employees. The recourse to English, the dominant European language of Natal, is seen as a natural development for practical purposes. Early legislation promising improved status to Indians on adoption of 'Western' habits, provided additional incentive for the acquisition of English. An account is given, from the early stages, of the development of a Western 'English type' education for Indians, and some of the problems of communication and language medium are discussed.

The main object is to assess the relative importance of English and the Indian languages for the Indian South African population, and this was undertaken by an investigation into language practices of a sample of 546 Indian pupils in their last year at high school, and their parents and other members of their households. The investigation was extended to include interviews with representatives of the various Indian language groups, amongst whom were religious leaders and teachers of Indian languages. Responses to questionnaires to the pupils and their parents revealed a steady supplanting of the Indian mother tongues by English – a marked increase in the use of English was noted between the generation of parents and the generation of 'teen-age' children. While 62 per cent of the children used English exclusively amongst themselves, 52 per cent used only English with parents and 24

per cent with grandparents. While 38 per cent of the pupils used the Indian languages with grandparents, 74 per cent of their parents could communicate with the grandparents only in the mother tongues. It was discovered also that parents used more English with their younger school-going children than with their older married children, and more with their married children than between themselves or with their parents. Over 40 per cent used only English and nearly 71 per cent used more English than the Indian home languages with their school-going children, 28 per cent used only English with their married children and 6.87 per cent used only English with their parents. The responses showed that a higher percentage of parents had attended English medium schools than had attended the Indian language schools (approximately 90 per cent as against approximately 70 per cent). The responses of the succeeding younger generation showed that 44 per cent did not attend or had never attended the Indian language schools and that only 11 per cent could communicate in writing in an Indian language although 56 per cent had had some instruction in the home language. 74 per cent of those who had attended were nevertheless incapable of using the mother tongues for purposes of written communication.

The interviews gave further emphasis to the main points raised by the responses to the questionnaires. In addition, they provided information about the organisation of, and the teaching in, Indian language schools. It was reiterated several times over that children did not stay on long enough to make any significant progress in the use of the Indian languages, that the quality and quantity of the teaching personnel was inadequate, that methods of instruction were outmoded and that facilities were limited. Parents' responses, as well as the opinions of persons interviewed, revealed that the desire to promote the Indian languages was rooted in tradition and sentiment, while practical necessity impressed the growing importance of improved standards in English. While over 36 per cent of the parents considered English to be more important, only just over 1 per cent made the same claim for the Indian home languages. Amongst other statistics was that 90 per cent of the pupils said they think in English. This has profound implications for English and immediately leads to conjecture on the standard of the English that has supplanted the Indian mother tongues.

In order to ascertain the standard of the written English of Indian high school pupils, a language test was given to a sample of 546 Std X

pupils from three urban high schools. A control group of 410 White pupils, drawn from the Std X classes of four urban high schools, was used. A detailed comparative analysis revealed that White pupils, on the whole, returned superior performances. In the Comprehension exercise (Part I of the test), based on an extract from an English classic, a 20 per cent disparity was noted. This appeared, amongst other factors, to be the result of the greater remoteness of the language of English literature for Indian than for White pupils. The failure of pupils to understand much of the vocabulary and idiom, and the other rather less 'tangible' aspects which can perhaps be described as the literary imagination of the author, raises the question of the literary and cultural background of Indian pupils in South Africa, of their alienation from their native culture and their lack of grasp of the deeper and subtler implications and nuances of English. Basic differences of approach to, and in the content of essays (Part II of the test), reflected some differences in the socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of Indian and White pupils. This brought to light the important factor of linguistic deprivation. In the more formal aspects of essay writing, such as those of spelling and punctuation, and arrangement of paragraphs, Indian pupils fared well, and their spelling was, on the whole, better than that of White pupils. In sentence construction, however, a disparity of about 25 per cent was noted. While both groups were equally guilty of some important stylistic errors, some distinctly Indian tendencies were apparent. Amongst these were the tendency to separate the verb from the subject, non-agreement, errors in the use and sequence of tenses, incorrect use of auxiliary verbs and of pronouns. The misuse of prepositions was amongst the most serious of the shortcomings and is directly associated with the non-existence of prepositions in the Indian languages. The same reason can be advanced for the omission and redundant use of the article and the wrong use of certain singular and plural forms. The poor use of English idiom, and the substitution by 'Indian idiom' which often took place, suggests the continuing influence of Indian language habits despite the general decline in the use of the Indian mother tongues by the younger generation.

As the spoken form is the more important aspect of language, an Oral test was given to a sample of 40 Indian South African pupils and students. The control group consisted of 28 Indian and Pakistani pupils and university students as part of the object was to determine the extent to which Indian languages continue to influence the spoken and

written English of Indian South Africans. The test also sought to assess the ability to understand English spoken in a natural situation, to respond in an intelligible and fluent manner, to pronounce English words correctly and to read and speak with correct phrasing, stress and intonation. The test, in five parts, involved a short interview, the reading of a list of words, of short sentences and phrases, of longer sentences and of a continuous prose passage.

The over-all picture with regard to the pronunciation of Vowel and Consonant phonemes, is that there are serious interferences even in the English of the educated Indian speakers, and that a large proportion of this can be attributed to the influences of the Indian languages. Among many such Vowel deviations are: /ɒ/ for /ɔ/, and /ɔ/ for /ɒ/, /ʌ/ for /ə/, as in *difficult* (usually said [dɪfɪkʌlt] and /ɑː/ for /ə/ as in *commas* (usually pronounced [kɒmɑːz]). Others such as /æ/ for /ɛ/ as in *twelve* ([twælv] instead of [twɛlv]), and /ɛ/ for /æ/ as in *damp* ([dɛmp] for [dæmp]), /ev/ for /ɑv/ as in *council* and /ɒ/ for /ə/ as in *continue* [ˈkɒntɪnju] for [kənˈtɪnju], appeared to be the result of influences of some varieties of South African English. The Consonant deviations that were noted, appeared to originate mostly in the transference from Indian phonemic and phonological patterns. The non-existence of certain phonemes such as the English fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ in almost all Indian languages led to the constant substitution of these by the nearest Indian sounds – the voiced dentals /ṭh/ and /ḍh/, while the v/w confusion, though not nearly as prevalent as in Indian English was sufficiently in evidence to show the continuing transferences of sounds from Indian languages. The non-pronunciation of the aspirate /h/ was seen to be characteristic of speakers of South Indian languages and has strong links with its non-existence in Tamil, a South Indian language of Dravidian origin. Amongst other consonant deviations was the substitution of /z/ by /s/ terminally, an indication of the difficulty encountered in saying /s/ in a terminal position as it does not occur in this position in many Indian languages.

The loss of aspiration in /t/ in *told* and *potato* and the loss of the contrast between /t/ and /r/ in *Saturday* and *potato* were found to be amongst the relatively few characteristics in common with other 'dialects' of South African English.

The absence of most English consonant clusters in the Indian speech systems led to various modifications in their production, chiefly that of the insertion of /ɪ/ or /v/ between the consonants. A summary

of the main consonant 'faults' showed the continuing influence of Indian speech sounds on Indian South African English, as well as some modifications through the influence of South African English.

Unusual and sometimes faulty intonation patterns were noted. The comparison with Indian speakers revealed some common factors such as rising and rising/falling inflections chiefly at terminal junctures. Reading was often on a level pitch except at the ends of sentences, and the effect of rising inflections was to give many statements the intonation pattern of a question. The sentence stresses were sometimes faulty in both groups and the location of the intonation nucleus was not always where it would ordinarily be. This led to many unusual stress patterns some of which were unacceptable.

More than half the subjects in each group read well – with confidence and understanding. The results obtained were without doubt also affected by limited reading practice.

The errors described often continue in the work of students at post-matriculation level. The examples of poor usage given here were taken from written assignments of B.A. English students and from practical teaching lessons of teacher trainees. The main object of this section of the thesis is to emphasise the importance of good English particularly for would-be teachers.

The thesis ends with a review of the total picture and some suggestions are made for an improved teaching programme. These include:

(a) the qualifications of the teacher of English. The main points made are that proficiency of the highest order is demanded on both the spoken and written planes, that a thorough 'background' training by way of a comprehensive and intimate knowledge of English literature is necessary, as well as an awareness of the link between the culture and the language of a people, and a sympathy and feeling for the language.

(b) methods. The situational technique and direct method trends are recommended particularly in the early years of English teaching, and emphasis is laid on language tutorials and the use of language laboratories – in which technique the teacher must be trained. 'Controlled' conversation periods are recommended and emphasis is placed on building up a command of language by practice rather than by exclusively formal methods. Learning the language, rather than about it, is the chief point made. Attention is drawn to the value of

reading aloud, of speech training, of the radio and of libraries as essential aspects of a thorough and total training in English.

Aspects of the problem of bilingualism which cannot be countered by the methods outlined, are also mentioned. These are associated with the linguistic deprivations of the culturally disadvantaged and lower socio-economic communities. The suggestion is made that the whole question of English teaching in the Indian South African context be reviewed thoroughly by a team of economists, sociologists and psychologists together with educationists in order that a total picture may be obtained, as many of the problems are outside the scope of the educationist alone.