Verbalization of Polite Behaviour in Indian Englis

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Politeness may be defined as showing consideration and good manners towards others in speech and behaviour. The generally accepted constituents of polite behaviour include meekness, self-effacement, being unobtrusive and showing deference. "Politeness is like an air-cushion; there may be nothing solid in it, but it eases the jolts of this world wonderfully" (Wiggin 1885:12). The Indian community offers a fertile field for the exploration of forms and strategies of politeness by virtue of its highly stratified structure and religio-ethical character. Vinay and Namrata are the popular personal names in India, each meaning literally 'politeness'.

It is curious that what is considered to be polite in British English is thought to be strange and rude in Indian English and vice versa. This is mainly due to the different socio-semantic space being occupied by the two varieties of English. "Hello" is less polite in Indian English than in British or American English. Addressing a teacher by his/her first name is a common practice in the West and it does not imply any discourtesy to the addressee. But such a way of behaving in the Indian English context will be condemned as an offence and a downright insult. When an English term is not found to be adequately deferential, the resources of an Indian language are exploited. The phrase "my revered Guruji" is preferred to "my revered teacher"; guru being considered more reverential than teacher; even more than a god in our hoary tradition. In India it is customary to address a woman as sister though no man in England or America ever calls a woman sister unless one happens to be in the nursing profession. The wife of an unrelated friend is usually called bhabhi (brother's wife) even in the midst of a discourse in English. This is because Indian culture, tradition and literature strongly recommend deferential behaviour towards women in general.

Names of some occupations such as doctor and nurse can be used as forms of address in England and America, but not in India. The sentences, "Can I speak to you Doctor?" and "Nurse, can I have a sleeping pill?" are perfectly acceptable in the Western context. But in the Indian context they may be considered discourteous. The doctor in Indian English will be addressed with an honorific as Doctor Sahib or Doctorji and the nurse as sister. Zimmerman has this to offer by way of explanation, "The rudeness, or at least the lack of overt respect, involved in the use of title alone, in the English of India, even when the title denotes a fairly high-level occupation might be attributed to two factors. One is the prevalence of honorifics in the languages of India, so that their lack is keenly felt. The other is the common practice of using title as a form of address to nonintimate inferiors" (Zimmerman 1981:15). Some divergence is also noticeable in the use of kinship terms as forms of address. For example, it is customary in England and America to prefix terms "uncle" and "auntie" to the name of a person as in Uncle Tom and Auntie Mary but in Indian English the kinship terms are suffixed to a personal name as in Raj Uncle and Meenu Auntie. A woman in the West may informally be addressed even by a stranger as Darling, Honey or Love but if someone in a similar situation in India dares to address a woman in this fashion, he may be subjected to quite a beating by both the addressee and the passers by. In the same way , shaking hands with a woman is an accepted form of greeting in the Western culture, but even an English speaking Indian woman may feel embarrassed at the offer of a handshake by a man, howsoever great his status might be. Thus, norms and forms of politeness vary among speakers of the same language in England and India.

There are numerous instances of verbal expressions considered polite in Indian English but impolite or neutral in British and other native varieties of the language. A speaker in his welcome address at a function often refers to the august presence of the chief guest. The use of 'august' in such contexts may appear sarcastic to the native speakers of English abroad. Similarly un-English is the use of "esteemed" in "Your esteemed order has been noted". The standard British or American usage does not favour the prefixing of the title "Mister" with the first name of a person, which is a common practice in Indian English. An average Indian speaker of English refrains from referring to his wife as "My wife". He would rather refer to her as "Mrs so and so" or else "My Mrs". This

is what Subrahmanian has to say on the use of "My Mrs", "This may be considered rather vulgar by native speakers, but this is the Indian compromise between the possessive 'my wife' and remote 'Mrs X' " (Subrahmanian 1978: 296). In British usage the word 'lady' refers to a woman belonging to the upper class or having some social position, but in Indian English the word may be used to refer to any woman i.e. "He is looking for a lady to look after his kitchen".

In British English "ask" is generally considered to be synonymous with "request"; not so in Indian English. In Indian English the word is devoid of any tinge of politeness whereas "request", on the other hand, carries a greater load of politeness than in British or American English. Moreover, in Indian English the passive voice construction, "you are requested" is considered less polite than the statement in the active voice, "I request you". The use of passive voice construction is thus restricted to a boss while addressing a subordinate and not vice versa (Mehrotra 1982:166). Then there are certain situations in which an Indian speaker of English is by convention supposed to say "No" whereas his counterpart in Britain and the U.S. would be saying "Yes". Violation of this practice would be considered a discourteous and ill-mannered act. For example, a guest dining in a traditional Indian family is expected to say "No" to the second or subsequent helpings offered by his host who in turn is supposed to interpret it as "Yes" and act accordingly (Mehrotra 1985:17). The load of social meaning that the single word "No" is pregnant with among Indian English users is inconceivable among the native speakers of English.

"Please", the formulaic adjunct is used as a marker of courtesy in all varieties of English. But both the grammar and usage of this word in Indian English are not identical with those in British English. In British English there are three ways of asking politely for things, each being determined by the position of "please" in the sentence and suggesting a corresponding increase in emphasis as exemplified below:

Could I come please ?

Please could I come ? (emphatic)

Could I please come ? (more emphatic)

Indian English does not normally make a distinction of this sort and has only the first type of query in

common use. Furthermore, the word "please" cannot be combined with "No" in British English as it is usually done in Indian English. Consider the following piece of conversation,

> "Shall I get some medicine for you ?"
> "No, please, my brother has already gone to bring the doctor."

It needs to be emphasized here that merely adding the word "please" to a sentence may make it a polite request in Indian English but not in British English.

With a view to studying the nature, pattern and degree of politeness in simple queries in Indian English, 30 students doing M.A. English course in a University in North India were asked in 1991 to list all expressions they would use in borrowing a pen. Interestingly, they recorded no fewer than 75 verbal ways of borrowing a pen out of which 52 expressions showed a single occurence each. This clearly indicates a relatively lower percentage of standard and fixed forms of verbalising simple requests in Indian English than is the case with British or American English. In other words, Indian English offers greater laxity and scope of individual variation on a cline of politeness with its two ends representing "polite" and "familiar".

Given below is a list of 10 expressions selected from our corpus and arranged in the order of diminishing politeness:

1. Will you be kind enough to let me use your pen?
2. Would you mind if I borrow your pen?
3. I feel shame for not having a pen of my own at the moment.
   Can you help me by giving one?
4. May I have your pen please?
5. Please give me a pen.
6. Pen please.
7. Are you able to give me your pen?
8. Have you got two pens?

9. I want your pen.

10. Hey, have you got a spare pen?

Some of these expressions may look odd and also rude to the speakers of English outside the Indian sub-continent. The Britishers travelling in a bus, are accustomed to listening "Fares please", but not "Pen please". Similarly, "Are you able to give me your pen?" is translation of a Hindi sentence and is unheard of overseas. "Have you got two pens?" is an interesting example of asking for a pen by implication. The use of interjection "Hey" in the last sentence lends a familiar, informal tone to the utterance. Moreover, the stylistic range of their expressions is fairly wide which is in keeping with the variation in the degree of politeness.

In comparison to the native speakers of English the Indian English speakers tend to use smaller number of modals. For example, "May I borrow your pen?" is the form having maximum density of response in American English as reported in an empirical study (Hill et al. 1986:359) but in Indian English it has a very low density. To an average Indian English speaker a modal does not make a request polite to the extent it does to a native speaker of the language. This explains the popular and preponderant use of 'please' along with a modal, i.e. "May I borrow your pen please?" Incidentally the expression scoring the maximum frequency of occurrence in our study is the one without a modal, "Please give me a pen". Moreover, certain politeness markers like "Might I...", "Do you think I might...", "Would it be all right if...", "Do you think I could possibly...", "I was wondering if..." which are commonly used as verbal devices of politeness in Britain and America are conspicuously missing in the Indian English usage.

Expression of gratitude is universally acknowledged as an act of politeness. In the bilingual situation of Hindi-English speakers in India, it is found that the verbal expression of gratitude is more common when the interaction takes place in English than in Hindi, the interlocutors remaining the same. Furthermore, when the same set of speakers use Hindi-English mix in conversation, they feel drawn to saying "Thank you" than its Hindi equivalent "dhanyavad". This suggests that verbalization of gratitude as a rule, is closely related to the genius and the cultural ties of a given language.

It is significant that the practice of saying a phrase or formulae equivalent to "thank you" was almost non-existent in ancient India.

This explains why verbalization of gratitude is very common in families with western life style and very rare in the orthodox Hindu families. Again, a typical Hindi-English bilingual tends to offer thanks in a western style restaurant but not in an Indian style dhaba (eating place). He says "thank you" in a well decorated hair-dressing salon but refrains from saying it or its equivalent dhanyavad in a traditional barber-shop on the bank of a river or a pond. Similarly, "Thank you Papa" is heard every now and then but "Thank you Pitaji" or "Dhanyavad Pitaji" is unheard of in the Hindi-English bilingual setting. While addressing his wife a man can say "Thank you darling" but not "Dhanyavad Priye" or "Shukriya Lallu ki ma" (mother of Lallu) unless one desires to be sarcastic or is a terrible tease.

As a matter of fact the speakers of British, American and Indian English behave differently over the issue of offering thanks for small or unimportant things. In a situation involving the giving of change by a shopkeeper to a customer both the people will say "Thank you" in British English, only the shopkeeper will be saying "Thank you" in Indian English and none of them will be saying it if the dyad consists of speakers of American English.

One of the popular politeness strategies in many countries and cultures is to lower oneself and elevate the addressee through verbal means which seems analogous to bending one's head or knees in prayer or supplication. The deliberate status distancing that is sought to be emphasized thus between the interacting dyad is intended to develop a positive attitude towards the speaker and serve as a subtle means of pressurization to attain a particular goal. For example, in a wedding invitation in Indian English the writer places himself in a very humble position and the invitee in a correspondingly exalted position by cordially soliciting his gracious presence or else requesting the pleasure of his benign company at the wedding of his son or daughter.

The covering letters accompanying the articles sent for publication to a newspaper or magazine contain ample evidence of this aspect of polite verbalization. Here

are a few extracts from letters sent to the editor of a national daily, The Hindustan Times:

> "I request your permission to make public my tiny poem."
>
> "I hope you would be kind enough to go through the poor words of my article."
>
> ". herewith a copy of my idle exercise."
>
> "I believe this time that you will encourage this writer to stand on his own feet."
>
> "I am not a veteran writer worthy of a place in your reputed daily, but I am daring to send this enclosed article..."

On the other hand the editor, who does not want to appear impolite , informs the writer that he found the article stimulating and interesting but regretted his inability to publish it. The Indian editor, however, falls short of excessive politeness noticeable in his Japanese counterpart who had this to say once in a rejection slip, "We are returning your piece as we find your article of such a high standard that it would be impossible for our paper to maintain it."

Excessive politeness often bordering servility on the part of a petitioner may largely be attributed to the colonial rule and its hangover. However, in the wake of independence and the institution of democratic form of government the polite formulae and phrases expressive of servility are gradually disappearing from the Indian scene.

Actions, they say, speak louder than words. This is particularly so in regard to politeness behaviour. As a matter of fact body language plays a more important role in conveying the depth and degree of politeness than the conventional verbal formulae. Any study of politeness which concerns itself with verbal phraseology only will, therefore, remain partial and incomplete.

Politeness behaviour in Indian English admits of far greater proportion of non-verbal elements than is probably the case with the politeness phenomenon in the British or American English. Exchange of greetings in an Indian English discourse may incorporate either a word from Indian language like namaste, namaskar,

pranam, salam, vanakkam or a phrase from English, i.e. Good Morning, Good Evening, Good Day and Hi. But in either case, a verbal greeting is generally accompanied with a non-verbal act or gesture. Saying "Good Morning" with folded hands or with a raised hand as in salutation may look odd in the eyes of a westerner but in India this is a common practice. Similarly, saying namaskar is less polite than saying it with folded hands even if the entire communication takes place in English. Given below are some examples of non-verbal elements accompanying a verbal politeness formulae, taken from the written texts in Indian English:

Respected Brother, with folded hands namaste.

Please convey my charan sparsh to respected uncle.

I pray with my two folded hands.

I beg you with my white hair.

Thus, it is obvious that politeness is not dependent on language to the same extent as other speech acts are for their performance (Mankaudi:21).

Politeness also depends at times on the lack of directness in speech. Normally, the more indirect the expression one uses, the more polite he will appear. The notice "No Smoking" or "Smoking is prohibited" has for this reason been replaced in Indian English by "We don't smoke here". The command "Take off your shoes here" has been discarded in favour of "Please allow the shoe-keeper to look after your shoes." Interestingly, when a prohibitive instruction is to be displayed in the form of a public notice, the use of indirect style is found to be more effective, although impolite. To discourage the passers by from urinating against the wall of a house--a common sight in some parts of North India-- the owner of the house usually puts up a notice in bold letters, dekho, gadha peshab kar raha hai (Look, the donkey is urinating).

The foregoing account lends empirical support to the hypothesis developed by Hill et al. that "all human speakers use language according to politeness, which we believe is fundamentally determined by Discernment. Discernment, in turn, is determined by various factors, of which the major ones are the types of addressee and the situation" (Hill et al. 1986;351). The Indian English politeness forms and formulae may appear to some

as "signs of slavery", "fossilized colonial expressions", "readymade comic possibilities" and so on. But to a serious scholar of language and society they offer some useful insights into the sociolinguistic rules governing their use in the midst of an interplay between the forces of tradition and modernization. The study also highlights certain "special qualities" and "regional characteristics" of sociolinguistics in India as distinct from sociolinguistics in other parts of the world. What Peng says in the context of Japan needs to be specially emphasized in the context of India, "...perhaps sociolinguistics has its own special 'qualities', not like Physics or Chemistry but, rather, like music or art which may be allowed to develop regional characteristics or peculiar native features so that it may reflect certain 'ethnicity' of the place where it has grown."

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