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## **SOME LANGUAGE ISSUES AND TRANSLATION PROBLEMS**

### **IN THE WRITINGS OF**

**R.K.NARAYAN, ANITA DESAI, ANITA NAIR**



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### **A B S T R A C T**

In the linguistically and culturally pluralistic Indian subcontinent English is used as the Second Language(L2), which is acquired after one has learnt the First Language (L1), This co-existence... result in interference from one's First Language in the Second Language. Through a large-scale socio-cultural interaction with regional contexts English becomes Indianised. A variety of English albeit non-native, lexically, morphologically, syntactically, stylistically, and socio-linguistically, different from the Standard British form has come to be known as Indian variety of English.... English, as a link language in India, carries the weight of different experiences in different contexts/ surroundings. English is essentially malleable in nature, adapting its form to suit cultural contexts.... In the case of literary Indian English,

loan translations or word borrowings from the regional language of the subcontinent are embedded in the English text, as markers pointing out a cultural distinctiveness. The writers of Indian writings in English often refuse to gloss untranslated words/ expressions to be true to their respective roots. Lexical openness is a trademark of Indian English canon.

The term “Indian English” refers to the variety of English which is learnt and used by a large number of educated (in the conventional sense, someone who has undergone an intellectual and moral training) Indians as a second Language... Indian English has the status of an Indian Language, serves the international role of communication with the global community of nations and intraregional roles of link language among people of diverse linguistic background.

Stress will also be laid on the presence in IWE texts of potential translation difficulties for the translator of such texts into European/Western language other than English. I shall adopt an essentially descriptive and lexical approach. Talking into account the nature of Indian English as divisible into a number of lexical strands, considering both who uses a given word, expression or acronym, and when and why (the socio-linguistic perspective), and the origins and connotation of the terms.

### **Keywords**

Indian English, Loan Translations, Local and Global Approach, Lexical Openness, Connotations of the terms.

### **Research Paper**

Considering standard Indian English as a variant of standard International English, we may provisionally suggest, in a non-exclusive list, nine lexical strands as being specific to Indian English, which we shall now describe in turn : a) pan Indian terms, or words from Indian languages absorbed into Indian English as lexical items and understood throughout India- e.g. lakh, crore, dhoti, dhobi, mali; b) Indian “localisms”, pertaining to a specific language or cultural area, e.g. to take two south Indian culinary items: idli; dosa c) native Indian words that have been absorbed beyond India into general International English- e.g. karma; dharma; swami; sari; d) native Indian words that have been absorbed, more specifically into British English, either via the raj or more recently, e.g. through Indian restaurants or musical styles - e.g. (first type) wallah; pukka; dekko; (second type) chapatti; biryani; bhangra; e) transplanted Britishisms (word, idioms, acronyms) still used in the UK and recognizable as such to a reader from that country – e.g. GP (general practitioner); snazzy, culture-vulture; f)

“old” Britishisms, that is, terms that now seem dated or anachronistic to a British reader but are still current coin in India – e.g. GPO (general post office); thrice (for three time); doing bird (= being in jail); chip of the old block (= like father, like son); g) American or other neologisms pertaining to International English and often associated with globalization or with the journalistic register- e.g. MBA; start- up; h) coinages or acronyms formed from within the usual rules of English but unique to India- e.g. scheduled castes; shirtings; in- charge; nri (Non-resident Indian) ;i) cases of such coinages that have passed into International English, e.g. Bollywood, Goa trance. In its very richness and creativity, Indian English emerges from this descriptive analysis as a specific form of English that may legitimately be considered as important a variant of the international language as British or American English. It will, therefore, inevitably generate a number of translation problems of a specific nature, whatever the language translated into.

I have chosen four novels, two by men and two by women and three of them by living authors, that are set entirely in India, and whose character are entirely or mostly Indian. They are: *The pointer of signs* (1967) by the late R.K. Narayan; *in custody* (1984) by Anita Desai; *ladies coupe* (1999) by Anita Nair; and *the hungry tide* (2004) by Amitav Ghose. Of the four authors, Narayan and Nair lived or live in India, while Ghose and Desai are Non-resident (Anita Desai is, in addition, half-German, from her mother’s side). The characters in Narayan and Desai are Indian one and all; Nair’s are Indian apart from foreigners in brief cameo roles; and Ghose’s are Indian other than that one is a Bangali – American.

The location of Desai’s narrative is in and around Delhi; of Narayan and Nair’s, in south Indian; of Ghose’s, In Bengal. The dominant Indian language or language in the social environment described are, variously, Hindi and Urdu (Desai), Tamil (Narayan and Nair), and Bengali(Ghose). In each case and with the hope of at least approximately comparing like with like, I shall, while briefly explaining the plot, confine my analysis to the opening sequence of the book. It is obviously not my purpose in the present context to offer a literary critical analysis of the novels concerned 25, and the analysis suggested will therefore be essentially linguistic in nature, stressing the lexical, sociolinguistic and socio-culture aspect, and with a specific orientation toward translation. As we journey through these texts, I shall from time to time be invoking Hobson-Jobson, the epic Raj-era encyclopedic dictionary from 1885 compiled by Henry Yule and A.C. Burnell 26 which as, Salman Rusdie has said, bears “eloquent testimony to the unparalleled intermingling that took place between English And the languages of India”, and remains unsurpassed for wealth of information even to this day.)

**R.K.NARAYAN**

Our first analysis will concern R.K.Narayan's novel *The Painter of Signs*. This novel, published in 1967, locates its fictional events in 1962, in, as always with Narayan, the imaginary south Indian town of Malgudi. Raman, the painter of signs, is a bachelor of a certain age who falls in love with Daisy, a militant social reformer who works at a family planning center and is the embodiment of a new type of emancipated, feminist- post independence Indian woman. The projected marriage does not happen; Daisy departs Malgudi to take her message to ever more remote parts of south India, and Raman is left with even less than he had before. Raman is a native speaker of Tamil, but is collage-educated (presumably in English), and is a keen reader in both English and Tamil: "For browsing in the afternoon Raman hardly cared what book he chose; it might be Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* or [Thirivaluvar's] *Kural* – that tenth-century Tamil classic". The sign he paints for a living appears to be variously in either language, with occasional ventures into others such as Sanskrit. The novel's cultural codes thus shift continuously between India and the West, in what might be called a form of "cultural code-switching", so that Narayan's text can, on one and the same page, cite Shakespeare's *Hamlet* 29 and go on to recall Krishna's injunctions from the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The book's opening pages (I take the eight) 31, introduce not Daisy but Raman's daily routine. This first episode centers on a not entirely successful transaction between the painter of signs and a client, a just graduated lawyer who wants his name-board up outside his family's house. The dialogue between Raman and the lawyer presumably takes place in Tamil; the sign, however, is in English, for when Raman arrives at the lawyer's house he has to warn the man's entourage: "still not dry, The letter 'A' with all that amount of shading on its side will take time to dry. Don't touch 'A' whatever you may do"; and later Raman warns the lawyers himself: "Careful! Four 'A's are still wet. (...) Thank God you are not a barrister-at law, otherwise there would have been three more 'A's'".

We shall now consider what words or expressions in these pages of Narayan's might throw up translation problems in the hybrid linguistic context. The opening sentence reads; Raman's was the last house in Ellaman Street; a little door on the back wall opened, beyond a stench of sand, to the river"; the lexicon here is, the street-name apart, deadpan International English.

We then learn that "Raman had been bottom-holed by the lawyer", who wants his name-board "delivered on a certain auspicious day"<sup>34</sup>, and may note an idiomatic English usage in "buttonholed", but, at the same time, a use of "auspicious" that derives from very Indian

notion of astrology, a theme stressed several times which serves to highlight the clash between Raman's rationalism and the traditional beliefs of his entourage.

The two go to cheap restaurant to thrash out the deal. Here again Narayan's English is distinctively idiomatic, using a colloquial register that will certainly be familiar to a British-reader – “The lawyer backoned to a boy who was darting about the tables and bawled his order over the din of clattering cups and films music”<sup>35</sup> – but encompassing a specifically Indian reference to “film music”, which could be either pan-Indian from Bollywood or, in a nod to regional sentiment, the Tamil film industry in Madras<sup>36</sup>, and is therefore not quite as straight forward a reference as the non-Indian reader might think.

On the second page, the book's first specifically Indian lexical item come up, through proving to be nothing more difficult than “rupees”; further down, we find an Indian use of an English word in the form of (as in American English) “Kerosene” rather than the British usage “paraffin”; and later, “oil-monger”, an Indian coinage, though based on general English morphology, on the analogy of “fishmonger”. Colloquial Britishisms, taken over into Indian English, dot the text too, as in Raman's “That sounds pretty convincing” and “if a chap wants to steal ...”<sup>38</sup>. Indeed, no real Indian Localism appears until Raman has entered the kitchen of the lawyer's family house, with the precious sign in his bag. Now. “The lawyer and his two cousins become suddenly very active and effusive and propelled Raman towards the kitchen, saying, ‘Coffee’ and edali for this man”; following which: “Out of the smoke filled kitchen, a woman emerged blowing her nose and wiping her eyes, bearing on a little banana leaf two white idlis, tintex with red chilli-powder and oil”. South Indianness, a key theme in Narayan, is here connoted not only by the obviously exotic term idlis<sup>40</sup>, embedded in the English Language text, plus the localism of the banana leaf, but also, and less obviously to an outsider, by the apparently neutral reference to coffee as opposed to tea.

Over what remains of this episode, if much of the subject-matter- e.g. the priest's blessing of the new lawyer- is eminently Indian the language is for the most part idiomatically English. The lawyer's father shouts at the children: “Get out of the way, brats!” The lawyer turns round on Raman and Complains that there are said particles on the sign, challenging him: “Do you want me to start my career with dirt on my name?”, which elicits an aside from Raman: “You are bound to have it sooner or later, why not now?” –thus activating a notable feature of Indian English, its comfortableness with such sophisticated elements as figurative Language and double meaning with the adopted tongue. Raman departs in dudgeon, unpaid and concluding – ruefully but, again, in most idiomatic English: “He would be throwing good

money if he tried to do another board for the lawyer”, He goes on to reflect on the general sad state of business ethics in Malgudi, While wondering if he too is not in a way a willing part of the system he disapproves: “he felt abashed when he realized that he was perhaps picking his own loot in the general scramble of a money-mad world:”, Here “loot’ points up the historical and cultural complexities of Indian English: this word, which Anglophone readers will recognize as an informal term for plunder or ill-gotten gains, in fact came into British English through the Raj and drives, according to the concise oxford Dictionary, from the Hindi word lut; while hobson-jobson traces it back further to Sanskrit lotra, Locating its first use in English in 1788 and commenting that it “has long been a familiar item in the Anglo-Indian colloquial”, 45 Narayan’s text here shows Indian English re-appropriating a native term and bringing it back home a- nuance that a translator may find it hard to convey.

All in all, we may note from these pages of the painter of signs two facts of an IWE text that are likely to complicate the task of the translator: firstly, specifically Indian, and often local, cultural themes (south Indian identity; rationality versus tradition), whose proper communication calls for substantial familiarity with things Indian on the Translator’s part; and secondly and in a different direction, the strong textual presence of very English idioms, pertaining either to British or to general International English, whose exact register may be hard to reproduce in another language without the risk of over-naturalisation.

### **ANITA DESAI**

We shall now move from southern to northern India and examine the first chapter of *In Custody*, Anita Desai's Booker-shortlisted novel of 1984. This narrative, though written in English, is about what Desai's text explicitly calls "the politics of language", focusing on the rivalry between a dominant Hindi and an embattled Urdu, and, poised somewhere between elegy and farce, charts the decline of the once-vibrant Urdu culture of Delhi. This is expressed through the bittersweet encounter between Deven, a Hindu and hard up teacher of Hindi and part-time critic and poet, and a fading Muslim cultural icon, the vain, ageing but brilliant Urdu poet Nur. Deven lives in Mirpore, a small city - like Malgudi, fictional - located near Delhi, where he teaches at a low-prestige college: his subject is Hindi literature, but he was brought up bilingually in Hindi and Urdu. The book opens with Deven receiving a surprise visit at his workplace from an old college friend, Murad, who edits an Urdu-language literary journal: Murad asks him to go to Delhi and interview Nur for the journal, and Deven's acceptance of this task sets the story in motion.

*In Custody's* opening sentence is this:

"His first feeling on turning around at the tap on his shoulder while he was buying cigarettes at the college canteen and seeing his old friend Murad was one of joy so that he gasped 'Murad? You?' and the cigarettes fell from his hand in amazement, but this rapidly turned to anxiety when Murad gave a laugh, showing the betelstained teeth beneath the small bristling moustache he still wore on his upper lip".

This sentence raises four points, linguistic or cultural, which the non-Indian reader or translator should be aware of. First, Murad's name immediately identifies him to an Indian, but not necessarily to an outsider, as a Muslim. Second, the apparently unproblematic word "college" could raise translation problems into some languages, given the slipperiness of an educational term found in British, American and Indian English with varying significations in each, that does not necessarily mean the same thing in all contexts. In India, an institution called "college" can be, variously, a secondary school, a subdivision of a university, or, as here, a non-university higher education establishment, the imaginary, privately-endowed Lala Ram Lai College. Third, the book's first embedded Indianism appears in the shape of *betel*, defined by *Hobson-Jobson* as "the leaf of the *Piper, betel* [plant], chewed with the dried *areca-nut* ... by the natives of India" and derived by that dictionary, not, interestingly, from a north Indian or Sanskritic source, but - highlighting India's hybrid and heterogeneous cultural makeup - from the Malayalam *vettilla*, meaning 'simple leaf 49. Final!)'and perhaps most important, the one word "You?" raises the question as to what language-Hindi, Urdu or English-Deven and Murad would be speaking in - a question which Desai's text does not explicitly answer, but which I shall attempt to resolve at the end of this discussion. Further down the first page, Deven is named and thus identified, for the Indian if not the non- Indian reader, as a Hindu. Deven keeps Murad waiting for lunch as he has to give a class: if the attitude of the students seems, alas, universal enough and hardly requires cultural glossing - "boredom, amusement, insolence, and defiance" - a specific cultural note is sounded when Deven exhorts the class: "Last time I asked you to read as much as you could find of Sumitra Nandan Pant's poetry"<sup>50</sup>, thus identifying himself to the Indian reader as a teacher of Hindi but leaving a cultural trail which the translator may prefer to explicate. The two friends then go to lunch, at the cheapest restaurant the impecunious Deven can think of, and Murad's gibes at the food - "Raw radish -the food of cows, and pigs" - form a cultural marker, pointing up, via the implied critique of vegetarianism, the Hindu-Muslim antagonism that is one of the book's themes. Deven reflects sadly that "he could not possibly afford a meal in Kwality or Gaylord, the two best restaurants, both air-conditioned and exorbitant", Kwality -a case o fa standard E ngUsh w ord (*quality*) respelt and appropriated to create an Indian

brand-name - being a national chain of restaurants which any Indian would recognise, while Gaylord too is an established home-grown chain whose (English) name harks back to its two Indian founders. We are dealing here with very mixed cultural codes which the translator needs to be aware of.

As lunch progresses the two discuss Murad's proposed deal, namely that Deven, who though a Hindu learnt Urdu before he knew Hindi and is a lover, indeed a practitioner, of Urdu poetry, should go to Delhi and interview Nur for Murad's journal. Murad sharply denigrates the Hindi language as "that vegetarian monster", while praising Urdu as the "language of the court in the days of royalty": not all foreign readers will be aware of the parallel between Hindu/Muslim (religious) and Hindi/Urdu (linguistic) identities, and here the translator will have done well to explain these issues and their historical context in an introduction. An embedded Indianism, "nawabs" - one likely to be familiar to outsiders - now occurs, but is balanced by an idiomatic Britishism when Deven explains that he could never have made a living by writing at a time when he had to support his young wife Sarla: "'I was married, Sarla was expecting, you know'". Here, an unwary translator might fall into the trap of mistranslating "expecting" as referring to the treatment Sarla might want from her husband, but in fact this very British euphemism means "pregnant". The conversation moves on to Nur, and, in the last Indianism to be found in the chapter, Murad issues Deven the fateful command: "I want you to track him down in his house in Chandni Chowk". The Hindi term "chowk" is defined by *Hobson-Jobson* as "an open place or market street in the middle of a city where the market is held, (as for example, the *Chandni Chauk* of Delhi)"<sup>55</sup>; and this word, appearing as it does in so many Indian addresses, already plunges the reader into the Delhi back-street atmosphere that will dominate Deven's strange encounter with the poet.

The language in which the two converse in this extract is not specifically indicated, but it is likely to be the conveniently neutral English rather than either Hindi or Urdu: Murad speaks so pejoratively of Hindi that he can hardly be using it, while Urdu seems to be the respectfully-treated object of the discourse rather than its medium (though it is also possible, given the objective closeness of the two rival tongues, that Deven is speaking Hindi and Murad Urdu). At all events, both Murad and Deven are Hindi-Urdu bilingual (indeed trilingual if one adds on English), and the apparently monolingual text thus self-reflexively inscribes itself as an instance of Indian multilingualism. It is the translator's task to be attentive to the complex interweaving of cultural codes from three cultures - British/international English, north Indian Hindu and north Indian Muslim - that creates the dense texture of Anita Desai's unsettling novel.



### Anita Nair

With *Ladies Coupe*, Anita Nair's novel of 1999, we return to South India, and to an environment where, as in *Narayan*, the two main languages are Tamil and English. Nair tells the tale of a train journey through Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu and the intertwining life-histories of six women who meet in the ladies' section of a second-class compartment and tell each other their stories. They are represented as telling these tales in English, except for one who uses Tamil. The successive stories are framed by the larger narrative of the main character, Akhila, whose departure from Bangalore and arrival at Kanyakumari on the Tamil Nadu coast mark the book's beginning and end. Akhila, aged 45, a tax-office employee and still single, is getting away alone, for the first time in her life, from her constrictive, traditional brahmin family. Her late father was a bookish clerk whose favourite newspaper was an English-language publication; Akhila, educated in English and Tamil, is at ease in both languages and is an avid reader of women's magazines in Tamil, though her teacher of that language had scolded her for knowing the poetry of Wordsworth better than the works of Thiruvalluvar, the classical Tamil writer whom we have already encountered through *Narayan*.

In the opening sequence of the novel, we are with Akhila at the Bangalore Cantonment station, waiting for her train. The terminology that sets the scene, with the topographical and transport registers dominant, is already distinctively Indian, despite the English words employed. The title phrase ("coupe" is actually of French origin, thus incidentally pointing up the hybrid nature of English as such) refers to a gender-segregated convention, apparently now disappearing, of Indian rail travel; the Raj-inherited term "cantonment", scarcely found outside India<sup>60</sup>, denotes an Indian city's onetime military quarter, today generally a residential district for the elite. Both terms call out to the translator to be glossed. The first sentence itself, however, is in a round, unvarnished International English, with Akhila's name as the sole Indian indicator: "This is the way it has always been: the smell of a railway platform at night fills Akhila with a sense of escape". As it unfolds, the description of the station identifies it as quintessentially Indian, and the second paragraph throws up the book's first lexical Indianism with an evocation of "moist gunny bags", next to "the raw green-tinged reek of bamboo baskets" (*Hobson-Jobson* derives "gunny", i.e. coarse jute sacking, from the Sanskrit *goni* [sack], through Hindi and Marathi *gon* or *goni*, thus pointing to commerce as a source of the Anglo-Indian lexicon).

Next, Anita Nair's impressionistic prose focuses on Akhila's inner life, deploying resources of language and imagery that deftly fuse International with Indian English: 'so this then is Akhila. Forty-

five years old. Sans rose-coloured spectacles. Sans husband, children, home and family. Dreaming of escape and space. Hungry for life and experience. Aching to connect".

Here, despite the apparently simple incomplete sentences, Nair is in fact using highly idiomatic International English. The "rose-coloured spectacles" image is an interrogatory recasting of the cliché "seeing through rose-coloured glasses"; "sans", a French-derived alternative to "without", is archaic and, in a nod to the canon of the former colonial power such as we found earlier in Narayan, harks back to Shakespeare and his *As You Like It*; while in "aching to connect", the idiomatically intransitive "connect" raises another literary echo - "Only connect", the famous aphorism coined by a British writer to whom India was not unknown, E.M. Forster. In the next paragraph, attention shifts to Akhila's clothes, with an obvious Indianism appearing in: "she took time over every decision .. Even the saris she wore revealed this". The translator can easily gloss "saris", or may even not think it necessary to do so: the more difficult challenge is the task of communicating the flavour of Anita Nair's eloquent use of International English, its clichés, cultural codes and idioms.

Attention now shifts to Akhila's family life, and we learn of her conversations (presumably in Tamil) with Padma, her straitlaced younger sister: "Akhila felt her mouth draw into a line. Padma called it the spinster mouth". Here, while "spinster" is an International English term, if today decidedly old-fashioned in Britain, its *connotations* are clearly much harsher in the south Indian Brahmin context. Anna and Padma are described having breakfast: "three idlies, a small bowl of sambar, and a piping hot cup of coffee"<sup>68</sup>: here as in Narayan, both *idlis* (spelt by Nair as *idlies*) and coffee appear as south Indian markers, alongside the also very southern *sambar*. Once again, the regional dimension appears as a challenge for the translator.

Nair's narrative now returns to the railway station, and we read of Akhila's efforts the day before to get her ticket to Kanyakumari: "Akhila read the board above the line. 'Ladies, Senior Citizens and Handicapped Persons'". The notice is certainly in English, but reflects an Indian way of doing things: "there was a certain old-fashioned charm, a rare chivalry in this gesture by the Railway Board". Her ticket had in fact been arranged by a colleague, taking advantage of contacts to secure her a place on a crowded holiday train at short notice: "The train is full. There are no second AC sleeper or first-class tickets. What she has got you is a berth in a second-class compartment, but in the ladies coupe". The translator should here note, not only the culturally specific notion of (those who can) arranging tickets through privileged contacts rather than queuing first-come first-served, but also, lexically, the Indian term "AC fair-conditioned] sleeper", a category of carriage unknown to British train travellers. Her sister had asked Akhila how she would get to the station; her reply, "There are plenty of

autorickshaws", would no doubt require glossing and specification of what kind of rickshaw an auto is, especially for non-Indian readers who may have seen the film *City of Joy* and might, most erroneously, extrapolate the Kolkata hand-pulled rickshaw to all of India.

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