

Verbalization of Polite Behaviour in Indian English

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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 occurrence 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?