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Identifying English in the multilingual ethos of India with special reference to Salman Rushdie's Novels

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Abstract

The paper aims at reflecting the multilingualism in India. The focus has primarily been given to the communication strategy between different speech communities. The paper deliberates on the genesis as well as the spread of English language in India from the time of British Rule. The unique quality of this is that besides unveiling the genesis of multilingualism in India, it also gives a special reference to the depiction of multilingualism in the novels of Salman Rushdie which is a hot bed for the representation of multilingualism. The spread of English language in India cannot be separated from the above mentioned factors. During the British rule, the communication barrier was the biggest hurdle in the way of strengthening its rule in India. Therefore, they evolved that English language can bridge the communication gap between the ruler and the ruled. Thus they juxtaposed English language with the local languages which further strengthened the multilingualism in India. With the passage of time many Indians found English language necessary for job prospectus and showed inclination to master it. This paper will help both the researchers and academicians to have an in-depth knowledge about the multilingualism in India.

Keywords: Multilingualism, Speech community, Lingua franca.

Multilingualism in India

The propensity to progress and uplift the standard of one's life compel a man to tread and discover the hidden dimensions of alien cultures. The gateway to understand and comprehend a certain culture is language. The 1835 memorandum of Lord Macaulay in which he said, “a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia”, still reverberates in the Indian subcontinent. That is why India outnumbers all the non-native speakers in English. Thus the footprints of the English language on Indian soil were laid during the same period when East India Company gripped its feet in India.

The twentieth century is the age of globalization and scientific advancement and the 'Need' factor is utterly dominant. Most of the advanced countries of the world are in one way or the other accustomed to the English language. Therefore, all the underdeveloped countries are on the way to learn the recent developments in different sectors be it trade, commerce, education, technology etc. The English language is the key to understand and transmit these developments. At present, there are twenty-two dominant languages with almost seven hundred twenty dialects in India (Wikipedia).The communication through these languages alongside resulted in multilingualism. It became a necessity to know more than two languages among the speech communities and folks. Therefore, Multilingualism emerged because of the necessity to communicate with the speech community. It is a wider and recognized perspective that Multilingualism is a common need throughout the world, which emerged due to globalization, to communicate globally. The most common language, lingua franca, which is globally spoken, is English. It brought the world under one umbrella, propounded numerous advantages and placed common opportunities to the people of the world. It helped to access the knowledge of hitherto different cultures and the communication between unknown linguistic and cultural disparities became easy. Besides these developments, it also helped in the creation of different job roles globally.

As Prasanna puts it, “Capacity of switching codes provides an individual with a remarkable capacity and skill to adjust to different conditions she is exposed to. It makes her attitudes flexible, which leads to an awareness of the presence of diversity in and around her environment, and not only that, she has skills to deal with such situations”. (47)

Usually, people of a particular community communicate in one language but this mono-language communication within the boundaries of a particular community cannot isolate them from other speech communities. The reason for that is quite simple because the members of one speech community regularly communicate with other speech communities. This switching of codes from one speech community to other acquaints them to other languages thereby, bestowing them the ability to unlock the codes of a particular language for their benefit and prosperity. Similarly, the factors responsible for gaining impetus for multilingualism are migration, job factor, cultural contacts, trade, globalization and technological advancement.

The spread of the English language in India cannot be separated from the above-mentioned factors. During British rule, the communication barrier was the biggest hurdle in the way of strengthening its rule in India. Therefore, they evolved that the English language can bridge the communication gap between the ruler and the ruled. Thus they juxtaposed the English language with the local languages which further strengthened the multilingualism in India. With the passage of time, many Indians found the English language necessary for job prospectus and showed an inclination to master it. As stated by Madan Mohan Mandal, “Men like Rammohan Roy, saw that tremendous advantages could be gained by direct contact with the whole corpus of western learning which English education would make possible, and therefore raised their voices against the antiquarian policy”. (91-95)

There was a swift reaction from many Indian groups to learn the English language so that they could adjust themselves in the administrative offices of British India. There were regular demands from the Indian natives in favour of incorporation of the teaching of the English language. Since then, there is a constant increase in the number of English speaking individuals in India. Besides this rapid increase, the English language became a unifying language among diverse cultures and multilingual speech communities in India. The multilingual diversity of India is unified by the English language. “The traditional strong constituent of multilingual groups is further strengthened in modern times from one decade to another, as mobility within the country as well as the introduction of formal education in all parts of the country that insists on learning at least two languages until the end of high secondary education”. (**Ravi Kumar** 1+)

Similarly, for the smooth running of administration, the Indian constitution provides the right to the state to adopt Hindi or any language used in its territory as its official language or languages. (Article 345) Therefore, the acknowledgement of so many languages for official purpose is representative of multilingualism. Finally, the Indian multilingualism is characteristic in nature because it surfaced evolving different approaches as demanded by the situation and time.

Multilingualism in Rushdie's Novels

Rushdie's creative output of more than ten novels has consolidated his stature as an international writer; moreover, a special feature of his writing is engagement with history and multilingualism which runs throughout his narrative. As a postmodern multilingual, as is the case in his novels, Rushdie's demonstration of multilingualism speaks as much as his plots and characters do. Aditya Sinha in his review of *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008) likens Salman Rushdie to a "prestidigitator, a nimble-fingered writable to produce dizzying tricks with his pen/keyboard" (2). Rushdie further expounds that his use of language was, "to try and find a way of making English acquire the rhythm and flavour and music of Indian, languages. To try and bring a kind of India vernacular speck, an Indian sense of metaphor, across into English." (1)

Rushdie's novels have created a whole new variety of writing, particularly for its historicity and multilingualism than anything else. Surely the reader can observe the height of the powers of the writer. The liberal overdose of multilingualism particularly English, Hindi, Urdu and Spanish lends certain strangeness to the novels. Possibly it helps to locate the settings of his novels in their geographical locations in the numerous cities of the Indian subcontinent. Rushdie's use of multilingualism in his novels signals a new type of English to the world. His reader confronts glimpses of American slang, followed by the exuberant speech mixed in Urdu, Spanish and the royal plural 'hum', Takht, Funtoosh, Ye Akashvani hai etc in *The Enchantress of Florence*. Such ability of Rushdie has been described by Maria Cuoto as: "His prose, liberally sprinkled with Urdu, Hindi and Sanskrit names, the deliberately uncontrolled flow of sentence with repetition and sonorous content, suggest the chant of Indian traditional texts."(61-65)

Therefore, Rushdie's novels can be characterized by his own lines which are also true about India: "All these different lingos cut us off from one another," she explained. "Only English brings us together." (Rushdie 179)

Taking a clue from the poststructuralists aligns Rushdie with postmodern theorists who affirm that the classical dominance of English language can be rejected and questioned thereby experimenting by destroying the lexical rules; he incorporates words from several languages. The most prominent among them is the Spanish and the Indian lexical words such as: 'angrez' for the English man, 'budhha' for an old man, 'barfi' for sweets, 'goondas' for rascals, 'ooper neechay' for up-down, 'suspero del amore' for Moor's last sigh and so on. There is an unending list of non-English words which Rushie continuously used in the course of his writing these novels.

Rushdie's *Midnights Children* (1981) hailed by many as a trailblazer and a trendsetter has infused new life into the novel form. It is because of the incorporation of this multilingualism which further widened the popularity of his novels. His Hindustani lexical words which he incorporated into his novels can be summed up as: "baap- re- baap," 'badmash,' 'bhai-bhai,' 'bhelpuri,' 'chi-chi,' 'chutney,' 'dhoban,' 'ekdum,' 'fauj,' 'garam masala,' 'gur,' 'gulabjamuns,' 'habshee,' 'hai hai,' 'jailkhana,' 'jalebis,' 'kahin,' 'nasbandi,' 'pyar kiya to darna kya,' 'phut - e - phut,' 'rakshasa,' 'rasgullas,' 'sab kuch,' 'sarpanch,' 'yaar,' 'zenana,' etc. Rushdie's language at the lexical level is marked by the sudden intrusions of esoteric Latin and classical Arabic, e.g.: 'mucuna pruritis,' 'feronia elephanticus,' 'sunt lacrimac rerum,' 'kan ma kan,' 'fi qadim azzaman,' 'tilk al-gharaniq al,' ula wa inna shafa,' ata-hunnala-tuetaja," etc. (Ritu 188)

It should not be forgotten that such incorporation of multilingualism is Rushdie's hardcore strategy for anti-colonialism. Such multiculturalism delineated in his novels prepares a unique pedestal to capture the 'polyglossic' and multicultural reality of India. Rushdie has been consciously replacing the colonial English with the most common words from Urdu, Hindi, Kashmiri and Marathi which suits the Indian cultural milieu. As stated by Ritu: "By shaping the colonial English to the new, inventive, need-based usage, he challenges the idea of the illusory standard of normative or 'correct' usage. He forces the language of the centre to bear the burden of communicating the cultural experience of the periphery." (188)

Therefore, Rushdie reverses the order by relexification of the English language through his original and creative use which is a step in the process of the deconstructing of the colonial hegemony as propounded through the superiority of the English language. He accomplishes to promote the marginal to the status of colonial centrality. This reframing of language facilitates the novelist to witness and outpour his familiarity of a collective and heterogeneous cultural reality thereby to represent the usual rhythm of Indian speech communities and the basic gist of sub-continental life. Such “chutnification” and hybridization of languages represent how Salman Rushdie takes the task in narrating his ordeal with great sincerity.

The unique disposition of multilingualism aims to represent the plurality of the Indian nation which cannot be delineated by monolingualism. Rushdie’s novels represent the younger generation of India who uses English as a second language and commonly mix it with the desi lexical particularly Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Marathi and most essentially the speaker’s mother tongue. Such language is a common practice in schools, colleges, parties, parks and other places where people met. This multilingualism has been portrayed by Rushdie in the following: “if God meant people to speak many tongue, why did he put only one in our heads?” (48)

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