

## **Exploring the Linguistics of a Multicultural Discourse in the Use of English Language while Teaching Business Communication: Interpretations of a Teacher in a Masculine Culture**

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### **Abstract**

There is a certain proclivity of users of English as a second language to tread in the ambiguity of multicultural influences while foregoing the original norms of language. Often the use of a second language is fraught with linguistic trespasses and mirrors how cultural assimilation of myriad linguistic forms has evolved over time. While walking through the corridors of such idiomatic expressions, often stylistic elements are imbued with the local context of use of language popularized by common usages. These culturally representative expressions are the symbols of how text is used and interpreted by infusing the local perspective on culture and how the societal context is submerged in such discourses.

This paper explores the journey of a language teacher in using innovative approaches in teaching Business Communication and how contextually entrenched beliefs influenced the use of language. The linguistics of this emerging discourse is often submerged in the masculine cultural (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010) undertones which reflects the Indian diaspora's larger socio-cultural milieu.

This paper is concerned about the *markedness* (Wales, 2014) of such a discourse, which refers to any features, structure or patterns of the order of words or structure of English that is marked and hence, which appears culturally to be representative of the context in which it has been shaped due to the local proclivity for such socio-cultural conditioning.

The exploration of innovative pedagogy in addressing the nuances of linguistics to enable participants to fully grasp the cultural influences of the use of language has been fascinating. Hence in an attempt to understand the

impact of multiculturalism on use of language, and the seminal influence of such idiomatic expressions in shaping the discourse of business communication reveals the distinctness of language and its ability to traverse culturally through inherently held assumptions of communication. While using local languages the discourse of business communication is steeped in its connotations of a non-native use of such local language while the use of English acquires a syncretic cultural hue and posits problems of linguistics and the complexity of interpreting such linguistics, especially in Business Communication, where organizational discourse gets reshaped through the context of both language and culture. Hence this paper will explore the dynamics of the use of linguistics, which is locally tempered, while using English as a second language in teaching Business Communication; and the challenges of juxtaposing its sub-text in a neutral context in order to open the apertures of organizational communication processes to a deconstruction of the sub-text in the original language without losing the original nuances of such codification. It would be interesting to understand how sedimentation of cultural symbolism often permeates the construction of such discourses in organizational communication processes and how local adulteration of the use of language often both inhibits or facilitates a new contextual representation and disseminates the linguistics of both intent and culture. This paper posits the issues of linguistics in a multicultural milieu, and the common parlance of the local use of English which often represents a non- native perception of the use of a second language and hence attempts an interpretation of such a discourse which mandates the significance of understanding such contextual ambivalence.

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**Keywords:** Linguistics; English as a second language; masculine culture; Business Communication; India.

### **Introduction: An Indian multicultural Interpretive approach to English Linguistics**

While thinking of language through the lenses of culture, one interpretation of culture is “ in an anthropological sense of broad patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting. ...” (Hofstede, et.al., 1998, p.5). This helps one think of national culture as a “*dominant* mental program” (Hofstede, 1980, p. 95) Hence this leads to the question of what influences the transmitted thought in a given language (which is of a foreign import such as English) for those who use a language as mediated through a culture, and essentially through a culturally *dominant* mental programming. India has been defined as a culture which is high on Masculinity and that which values competition, success and achievement (Hofstede, 1991). In a linguistic connotation, the process of communication engages both the transmission and interpretation

of the language from the perspective of how status, dynamics of power and an emphasis on personal achievement gets emphasized in the dialogic preferences of the non-native speakers. For instance, while corporate communication patterns predominately structure around the territorial influences of this presumption, very often this gets captured in the teaching-learning syntax of the classroom processes as well. For instance, hierarchy is reflected in the use of words which denote an element of honor and achievement and is generally advanced through the language in the use of power-connotative words which denote power and contain hierarchical assumptions of both authority and cultural masculinity. While ruminating how one can teach communication across hierarchy, English posits the challenge of allowing words which could be less imbued in hierarchical tenor and more neutral but a non-native speaker who would perceptually use hierarchy as a pre-condition to suggest higher order or a more respectable station and would hence use words such as “we” instead of “I” to communicate position of hierarchy or superiority of station which is synonymous to positional power in a local language such as Hindi or Gujarati. Though grammatically inappropriate, this is culturally situated and often used with aplomb. In fact, I have observed that executives, oblivious of the grammatical connotations, continue to use this and assert their positions within the hierarchy through a subtle linguistic nod. To bring the attention of the user to this unique nuance of the language, I would often use a group discussion to help participants realize the hidden assumptions about how language could move across a gamut of unpredictable set of inherent symbols of power and positional territoriality in an organizational setting. This pushes English to accept the local ethos about organizational positions and accepts the regional reflections of such cultural interpretations.

### **Use of English in a Masculine society**

A continuous influence in language learning has been the formation of symbolic structures aligned with multicultural influences of other languages. For instance, in a local Indian language such as Bangla there is no neuter gender and hence the communication seeks to unequivocally raise the identity of either a male or a female, evocative of cultural representation of gender-specific dialectics embedded in the usage even while using the English language. The non-native speaker is befuddled with his or her expression of iterative uses of non-objective identity of the agency which he or she seeks to represent in one's discourse. Another instance of how the agency of masculinity permeates the context of communication is when a user of English emulates the context of cultural sophistication such as an improvised sense of importance assigned to the first person individual self as a collective pompous representation used as “we” or “us” instead of “I” ( a

commonly accepted usage in English) as interpreted from the much sophisticated and evolved linguistics of a local language such as Urdu which the local gentry endorsed and allowed with the vestiges of pomp and elegance of a cultural confluence ( a melange of Persian, Urdu and even other local languages such as Hindi) to seep in. The chaos of the communicative potential of such linguistics assumes disproportionately commonplace value as most users of English with an array of linguistic deviations of this kind permit inherently diverse meaning-making. The emergence of a parallel use of such linguistics enables the disparate reflections of culturally tempered and value-laden assumptions about the transmitted messages and the communicative import of any transaction. Language is thus about how words relate to our common reality and how speakers in a certain cultural context or community commit to common understanding about the truth (Pinker, 2008, p.3). When decoded such messages transmit an analogous decoding if the receiver of such communication is another non-native speaker but poses the challenge of ambivalence of intent when such communication is conducted with a user who is oblivious of such embedded symbolic linguistic representations. For instance, in a masculine culture, the discourse is always oriented in the male assumptions of the context of any communication and may discount any female trappings. While designing pedagogy, a teacher of Business communication will often face a male stereotype of an executive or a business manager and even of an engineer and hence any in-class teaching of business communication which aims to induce role sensitivity would mean redesigning the assumptions of how students internalize the impact of masculine roles in communication vis-à-vis feminine assumptions of such transactions. Inevitably, I often used a role play to sensitize the participants to the sensibilities of both male and female users, understanding the differences amongst genders as both men and women communicate, thus allowing holistic interpretation of the linguistics of such communication and ruling out the “sexist” intent of any sense-making. One quick assumption that users made during such role-plays would be to reflect upon the role to decode the “masculinity” or “femininity” of experience and focus on Business communication as the discourse of practical ambiguity as perceived from the perspective of the user and the receiver both. This would often make it possible for the users to ascertain the linguistic posers which often overrule the lucidity of communication. The agency of such communication transacts through both emotional and cognitive use of gender and hence complicate the assumptions in the transferred meaning of the message. For instance, I often observed that the male managers in the role play always assumed any emotional utterance as a display of self and authority while the female counterpart always assumed any emotional utterance as a display of

empathy and care. Some issues in language are directly sensitive to the place of a speaker in a society and his or her relationship with other speakers (Joseph, 2004, p.120) As a teacher of English as a second language and as a user of English as a language I have pursued the pedagogy of intent to access the linguistics of structure as well as meaning through the filters of both subjective interpretation of an individual's unique assumptions as well as the pluralistic meaning-making of cultural assumptions which are invested in the interpretation of business communication. While the meaning-making is the key to instructional learning, a basic postulate of transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1995) accepts the validity of Habermas's (1984) primary difference between both "instructional and communicative learning." This tempers the intent of instructional learning when language is used across a different culture and if used as a medium of transition from one set of linguistically and culturally embedded symbols to another form of culturally embedded symbolism though using the commonality of linguistic medium. This leads to the significant debate around the standards of linguistics and pedagogy, as well as the variation in the language, and the status of a local version of English and the norms that should apply to learners of English in an array of contexts (Phillipson, 1992, p.26). Thus as Habermas (1988) proffers while interacting and handling the inter-subjectivity of communication, one will encounter objects of the type of people who speak and act; and therefore as we interact with people, their expressions and conditions are in essence structured, and will have to be comprehended symbolically. This extends the debate around the linguistics of English in a foreign culture as the linguistics of symbolism and cultural representation which is different from the original form of the language.

### **Linguistic challenges of Indian English**

Often the cognitive descriptors of the complexities of the use of language lie in how a non- native user of English tries to conceptualize his or her thought through symbolic codification of words. While a course in Business communication would attempt to orient the user's awareness of language through formal and informal communication processes, often users would bring their multi-layered linguistic interpretations in the form of non-native internalization of the language through one's own experiential assumptions, and socio-cultural prejudices. While using Mehrotra's (1998) nine domains of the use of English in India such as trade and commerce, administration, education, family, recreation, hotel and restaurant. Sports, politics and religion, the use of language comes in multiple garbs and allows the user of the language to switch between an exclusive use of English and a populist use of the local language (p. 21-22). This creates a bizarre

amalgamation of influences across languages and allows the user to dip into a multilingual use of linguistics without any allegiance to the original restrictions imposed by each of these languages. A user of the language moves between colloquial forms of English to a more refined form of English from a street-side conversation with a neighbour to a more sophisticated interaction with an executive in his organization. Similarly, the English used in an organization's cafeteria and the English used in corporate correspondence would represent two different versions of the same language. While teaching forms of corporate communication, the linguistic representations would assume a clutter of linguistic distortions, such as often the participant would use the oral form of the language in the written correspondence without any structural sanctity. Even the situational context of how the language should be used would be often clouded. In fact, common parlance use of the language would be seen comfortably in strictly formal communication. So much so that I would encourage participants to draft different forms of corporate communication such as memo, letter or even draft minutes of a meeting to help them understand how English is used differently in each of these varied situations and to acquaint them with formal modes of communication.

Another linguistic challenge is evident in the use of words that are couched in local perceptive sediments. For instance, in certain communities which are not exposed to higher levels of education, an "educated person" would denote a person with basic education, as opposed to a community of users who have seen very high levels of education and to whom an "educated person" would mean a highly qualified person. This linguistic interpretation assumes a user's own potential to shape the connotations of the language through his or her own fulcrum of experience and previous knowledge of the context in which the language is used. This offers a huge opportunity to understand the importance of communication from the perspective of both the transmitter and the receiver and hence makes it mandatory to use communication as an interesting experiential exploration of those who are invested in this process. The use of language may often originate from the user's own understanding of the meaning of the words used as well as his or her own experience of such words encountered earlier or even as translated in his or her native language. For instance, a Bangla speaker of English will use the direct translation of the non-native structure of the language in English as "I eat water" since in Bangla water is "eaten" as there is no available word in the Bangla vocabulary to denote drinking. A Gujarati speaker of the language essentially uses the language in a colloquial fashion by literally translating his thoughts from the Gujarati into English and would use the sentence such as "I have grown big" (where "big" in Gujarati means old and big both) instead of "I have grown old". This works as a rather

sloppy linguistic bridge between local languages and English and is a matter of convenience for the user of English who merely uses the language as a literal vehicle of translated thought. Indian English uses a unique regional variation in many of its uses. For instance, compound formation is used often to allow unique morphological differentiators such as use of words such as pin drop silence or key-bunch or age barred or time-pass in local usage (Baldrige, 2002, p.3). A not so discerning user of the language even uses the plural and singular of words interchangeably, for instance women will be womans, sheep will be sheeps and deer will be deers. While many users will awkwardly use a singular form of the word in a structure such as “one of this chair” instead of “one of these chairs”. On the other hand, a Marathi user of the language often commits a phonetic trespass by pronouncing the word “project” as “prozect” and the Gujarati speaker of the language utters the word “basic” as “bayseek” rather than the word as spoken with a “z” in the pronunciation of “s”. This perhaps is a naïve assumption on the part of such users of the language that any two languages hold similar linguistic and phonetic structures and hence are mutually alike. Today Indian English is an inherently pluralistic form of the quintessential British English. It lives in its myriad local variations and represents a traditional potpourri of local influences. To advance the experiential genesis of the use of language, I would safely assume that many users of English struggle to cut the language into bits of information which simply communicate what the apparent structure of the language denotes and may sometimes short-change the linguistic purity to accommodate individual preferences and may also borrow extensively from regional Indian languages. While teaching a group of learners with a limited exposure to English, a participant quickly resorted to a language shortcut and wrote “I took *ashray* under a tree.” (here the word “ashray” means shelter in Hindi and is definitely a conduit to the user’s inability to access the English vocabulary and use “shelter”). Simply to accommodate these anomalies, now commonplace usages of words of local origin such as “maidan” , “dharna”, “haat”, “bazaar”, “chai” “badli” workers, “juggernaut” (a distorted usage of the word “Jaggannath”), coolie, rupiah, paisa and hookkah are now linguistically unmarked.

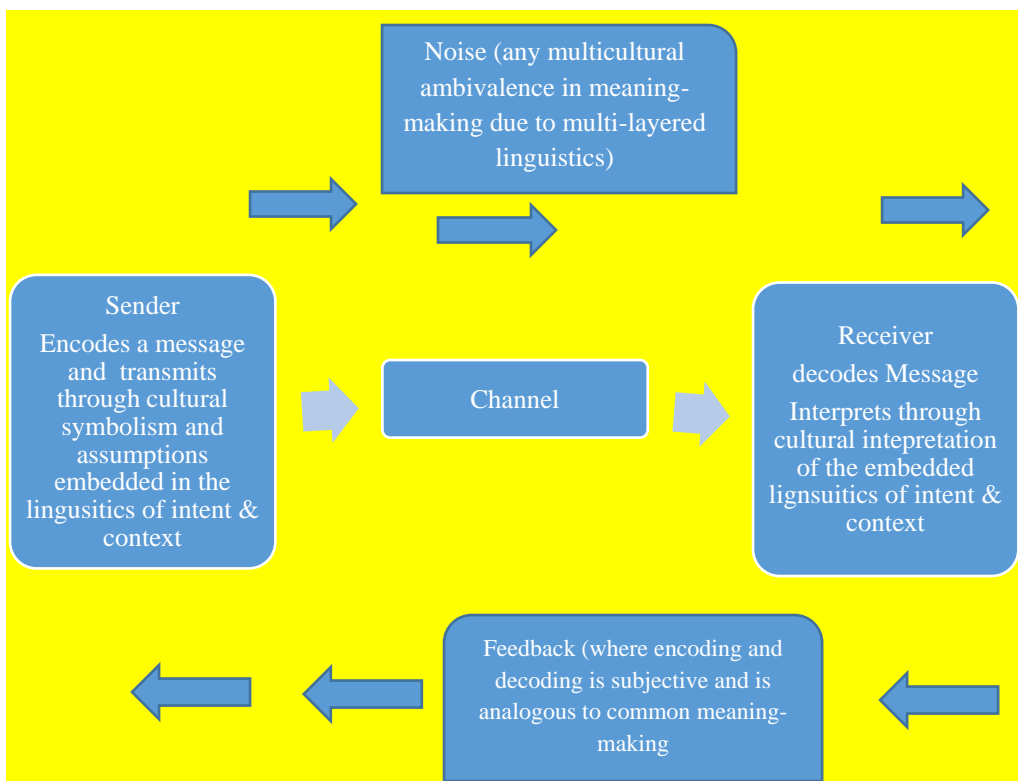


Figure 1. A Model of communication demonstrating the influence of multi-layered linguistics & meaning-making in use of English as a second language.

**Conclusion: Redefining the English linguistics in the context of socio-cultural pluralism**

The complete seizure of the Indian education system by Indian English has led the Indian sub-continent through a major churning of its linguistic identity in its educational discourses. Le Page and Keller (1985, p. 248) reflect that modern states seek to make “ethnic consciousness synonymous” and language is perceived as a tool to do so through the system of education. And they further mention that as opposed to this many nation states have tried to protect “cultural pluralism”. I concur with this argument and believe that the Indian nationhood is coping with this dichotomous struggle to move to a universal linguistic consciousness while retaining the cultural pluralism which permeates the context of using a foreign language through the filters of local linguistic identity. Inclusivity of non-English elements through cultural assimilation has been the biggest linguistic poser for the use of English in education. Indian English thus tends to be an extension of Indian life (Mehrotra, 1998, p.16). Within a complex hierarchy of the languages in India, the nation uses different languages at regional or



state level and two major languages English and Hindi at the national level (Bergs & Brinton, 2012, p. 2083). This creates an inter-connected confluence of linguistic amalgamation which churns up a new concoction of the language leading to an extremely complicated variation of the British English. In India today, English has emerged as a primary language of the media, education and administration and has evolved as the language of the most influential and the elite of the land. Thus this language has come to be associated with power, prestige and success (Sedlatschek, 2009, p.22). This evolution of multicultural English has drawn on various ethnic varieties and has emerged as the new version of British English in a developing India. This language denotes the progress of a nation in its socio-cultural metamorphosis post-independence and reflects the heritage of an independent India while capturing the aspirations and dreams of a nation which has allowed its multilingual and multicultural identity to be redefined through its emerging nationhood. This linguistic diversity is not an accidental process and is rather inherited and is integrated within the nation-making philosophy and history (Lewis, 1972, P.17) of India. Although English assumes the unifying role of *Lingua Franca*, in India, respect for multiplicity is the original integrating factor (Pattanayak, 2007, p.xi). English is the real national language of India (Joseph, 2011, p.2) Often users of English in India are forced to renegotiate dual or multiple linguistic identities as they have to deal with several languages in their communication at different levels of social transactions.

To me, as a practitioner of a reflective pedagogy, the pluralism embedded within the context of the use of English creates an interesting academic exploration through use of films or even poetry (specially a bio-poem where a student confronts his or her linguistic identity) to enable the participants to experience and explore the inherent linguistic tensions and to understand how language carries a dual meaning-making representation through the intermediation of one's personal cultural self and subjective experience. Even use of case-based teaching enhances the enablers for clarifying trans-lingual context and allows the participant to move out of the frame of reference and access newer meanings outside one's mental models. Frequently there is a conflict between the reality of the performance of speech and the consequent expectations emerging from the orientation of linguistic norms. Thus formal teaching contexts need norm orientations, as to which linguistic forms are acceptable and this leads to the question as to whose norms are accepted (Schneider, 2007, p.18.). Hence, as a teacher of English as a second language, the journey has been an eclectic mix of these confrontations and the question is as Hall (2013) reflects:

about questions of using the resources of history, culture and language in the process of becoming rather than being: 'not who we are', or

‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we may represent ourselves. (p.4).

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