

Chapter 3

Investigating Diachronic Variation and Change in New Varieties of English

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ABSTRACT

This contribution focuses on processes of language feature convergence which gradually lead to linguistic stabilization over time, whereby specific attention will be given to the process of Englishization in the South-Asian area. The chapter outlines some basic concepts pertaining language universals, contact, and change, as well as descriptive approaches to world varieties of English by referring to the feature classification proposed by Meshtrie and Bhatt. Then, as an explanatory case, it presents the results of a study of verb-particle constructions in a well-established variety of English (i.e., Indian English) obtained by sampling data from sources varying in time, genre, and register with a special focus on the methodological procedures and the analysis tools adopted to extract specific information from the data. Finally, the implications of those findings for future research on the process of language standardization in new varieties of English will be further explored.

BACKGROUND

The Study of Indian English From a Language-Contact Perspective

The issue of contact instantiating processes of pidginization and creolization can be differentiated according to varieties that arise through contact with languages coming outside the area, especially through colonialism and varieties that arise through internal contact among languages already indigenous to the area (Schiffman 2010, p.741). From this perspective, the South-Asian region can be considered a paradigm example of the phenomenon known as “convergence area” (Weinreich 1958) referred to phenomena specifically occurring in language contact situations that lead to changes in all areas of grammar.

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Some decades after Weinreich's descriptive study, Charles Ferguson (1992) published a comprehensive essay on some features of "language use" that make South Asia an interesting subject of study as "sociolinguistic area". His attention to "shared patterns of use" and not only of shared grammatical structures was an important step towards the understanding of general processes of language change in contact situations. Ferguson's particular perspective, in fact, "looks for the relationship between diachronic language change and language development, phonology and syntax, social conventionalization and cognitive processing, and language universals and individual differences" (Huebner 1996, p.12). Consequently, in studies concerning the development of new varieties, a crucial issue is the extent to which universals of language (Pinker 2003, p.23) and language contact exert their influence on shaping those language systems. Recent research has tested current hypotheses on the interrelationship between language universals and language variation and given rise to new challenging theories on contact varieties. Namely, the notion of "vernacular universals" (Chambers 2004) limits the supposed tendency towards the absolute creativity of these varieties relying on the identification of universally shared features across varieties of English around the world.

The Study of Indian English From a Comparative Perspective

To date, two important issues have not been exhaustively examined by experts in the field of variationist studies: the first deals with the characterization of Standard English at the time of colonization that was slightly different from today's standard against which new varieties of English are usually investigated, the second concerns possible internal and deterministically governed developments occurring in both early / late Modern English and its new emerging varieties¹.

When considering the peculiar contact situation in the Asian subcontinent English has played a major role in influencing local South Asian languages, though it was not the first European language to have an impact on them since Portuguese was already attested in the area before the founding of the East India Company in the early 1600s. By the end of the 18th century, the knowledge of English had grown greatly and replaced Portuguese as the lingua franca of India (Nihalani 2005, vi). However, it is worth noting that the General Report on the Census of India, 1891 still records a low average percentage (4.4%) of 'those who know English' (Baines 1893: 224) and "not anyone who learned English in India was taught directly by a native speaker of the language" (Nihalani 2005, vi). Moreover, the local British community is at that time supposed to be expanding to what Schneider (2007, p. 37) defines as "British plus: genuinely British no doubt, but seasoned with the additional flavor of the colonial experience which those who stayed 'home' do not share". 'Colonial lag' is the expression used to refer to the consequent conservatism in colonial varieties as a potential factor in distinguishing them 'from their home counterparts in all levels of language' (Bauer 2002, p. 5). Overall, some features of a colonial dialect can be predicted from the form used by the majority of the settlers (Bauer, 2002, p.11) who, in the case of India, came originally from the city of London (Salaja 2009, p. 95)². Anyway, 'in the colonial situation, a lot of speakers of many different dialects come face to face, and in the short term the result is a period of diversity where everyone is accommodating to everyone else [...] in most cases the form used by the majority will be the form that survives in the new mixed dialect' (Bauer 2012, p. 8).

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