



International Journal of Advanced Research in Arts, Science, Engineering & Management

Volume 10, Issue 6, November 2023



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

Impact Factor: 6.551



An Analytical Study of Phonological Features of Indian and British English

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ABSTRACT: This article offers a comparative analysis of General Indian English (GIE) and British English (BE) phonology, for the most part on Received Pronunciation (RP) as a point of reference of British norms. Through a synthesis of descriptive phonetics, historical linguistics, and socio-phonology, the research considers consonant and vowel systems, segment substitution, supra-segmental elements like rhythm, stress, and intonation, and latent phonotactic principles. It also briefs about socio-historical roots of Indian English and its pedagogical potential for English as foreign language (EFL) pedagogy. The results indicate that variations between Indian English and British English are systematic, linguistically conditioned, and based on language contact and identity building, instead of random mistake or symptoms of linguistic incapability. The article concludes that Indian English gained an autonomous phonology identity among the entire English continuum across the world.

KEYWORDS: Indian English, British English, phonology, rhythm, retroflexion, rhoticity, syllable-timing, language contact.

I. INTRODUCTION

English in India holds a distinct linguistic space as a second language of high functional load in education, administration, mass media, and literary production. Introduced during colonial times, it has, over time, developed into a variety distinctly marked by native Indian language influence on its phonology. British English, particularly Received Pronunciation, acted historically as the prestige variety, yet the Indian setting nurtured an indigenized variety of English with its own phonetic and phonological rules. Comparative analyses of phonology therefore assist us to follow the systematic features of these deviations and their generalized consequences for World Englishes theory (Kachru 19; Schneider 37).

This work intends to investigate primary phonological variations between Indian English and British English at segmental and supra-segmental levels. It also identifies sociolinguistic and pedagogical consequences of variation. It is conducted on the assumption that Indian English is a nativization of a language and its phonology shows adjustment for South Asian linguistic phonetic ecology.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Phonological comparison between Indian English (IE) and British English (BE) has been a prominent field of study since the initial characterizations of Indian English pronunciation. Bansal and Harrison's *A Handbook of English Phonetics for Indian Students* (1972) was one of the first books to systematically list segmental deviations from RP. It did this by listing substitutions like /θ/ → [t̪] and /ð/ → [d̪]. Wells (1982) expanded on this with acoustic descriptions of IE regional accents and recognized IE as part of the broader category of postcolonial Englishes.

Roach (2009) defines RP as the standard for international intelligibility and works out its phonemic inventory and prosodic systems. Ladefoged and Johnson's *A Course in Phonetics* (2014) still provides the speech organ basis for explaining changes between alveolar and dental articulations, vowel quality, and supra-segmental timing.

Kachru's *The Indianization of English* (1983) was the first major work in this direction, which had a profound influence on the sociolinguistic aspect: English in India, he said, had "nativization" and become "a symbol of identity rather than imitation." Schneider (2007) extended this theory later by introducing the "Dynamic Model" of postcolonial Englishes to indicate that Indian English had already undergone all phases of endonormative stabilization, that is, the stage in which local norms are set up. Moreover, Trudgill (2000) and Hickey (2004) added socio-phonetic ideas that help associate the patterns of pronunciation with the identity, cultural affiliation, and social mobility of the person.



The varied works of literature cited here serve to validate the concept of English in India as a stable and legitimate variety of the English language, a language whose phonology is made up of features that can be accommodated through linguistic contact and adaptation.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research is comparative and analytical in nature and is based on well-known phonetic and sociolinguistic research. It depends on secondary data sourced from descriptive linguistics, corpus-based studies, and standard reference works to pinpoint the recurring phonological features and compare them with the RP norms. The approach taken here is to highlight systematic regularity rather than deviation. Besides, the researcher perceives each feature not only through phonological rules (segmental and supra-segmental) but also through corresponding sociolinguistic explanations that deal with language contact, bilingualism, and the pedagogical context.

The study merges structural and functional facets of phonological variation with the help of theoretical frameworks from Kachru (1983) and Schneider (2007) and phonetic observations from Wells (1982) and Roach (2009).

Segmental Comparison

Dental and Retroflex Articulations

Blunting of alveolar stops by means of dentalization as well as the retroflexion of alveolar stops are among the most conspicuous features of Indian English. Most Indian languages make a clear distinction between alveolar and dental, and have very few alveolar sounds. Hence, English /t/ and /d/ as in *table* and *dog* are in most cases pronounced as dental [t̪] and [d̪] or retroflex [ɖ] and [ɗ] depending on the region. Unlike that, RP /t, d/ are alveolar (Wells 102).

For instance, in a case like *tea* and *day*, the dentalization of the tongue tip contacting the upper teeth can be quite visually evident. This characteristic is something that can be heard as the burst frequency of the stops is lower and it also helps the IE to sound differently from the rest of the world (Roach 71). The different realizations here do not imply random substitutions but systematic phonetic adaptation consistent with native articulatory habits. Alveolar Plosive sounds /t/ and /d/ are retroflexed in Indian English include pronouncing words like "top" with a curled tongue, which may sound like the Hindi 'ट' (ṭa), and words like "dog" with a retroflex 'd' sound, similar to the Hindi 'ड' (ḍa). This retroflexion, where the tongue curls back to touch the hard palate, is a characteristic of Indian English

Substitution of Dental Fricatives

Indian phonetic systems do not contain the sounds /θ/ and /ð/, which are the dental fricatives, thus, most of the time these sounds are replaced by alveolar stops [t, d] or dental plosives [t̪, d̪]. Consequently, *think* → [tɪŋk] and *this* → [dɪs]. Such replacements keep the voicing contrasts and are universal among language learners (Ladefoged and Johnson 74). From the point of view of speech clarity, such replacements are very unlikely to cause confusion, thus, these substitutions are still present in the educated GIE speakers.

Rhoticity and /r/ Quality

RP is mainly, historically non-rhotic, thus, it does not have /r/ in the syllable-final position, whereas Indian English is, for the most part, rhotic, /r/ is pronounced in all surroundings.

The /r/ sound can often be an alveolar flap [ɾ] or retroflex approximant [ɻ], therefore, native phoneme inventories are not disturbed (Kachru 40). As a result, *car* can be [kɑ:r] in IE while [kɑ:] in RP. Unlike RP, /r/ is also pronounced when it is followed by consonant sound as in *card* /kɑ:rd/. Rhoticity is, therefore, a sign of linguistic transfer as well as a sociolinguistic marker, especially, among those speakers who want to emphasize their "Indianness" in the way they speak English.

Aspiration and Voicing

In the British English voiceless plosive sounds are strongly aspirated, whereas in GIE, they are unaspirated at all positions in the words. For instance, /p/, /t/, /k/ may be aspirated more by Indian speakers, as they get the influence from Hindi and other languages like that which contrast aspirated and unaspirated stops on a phonemic level. On the other hand, partial devoicing of the voiced stops /b/, /d/, /g/ may occur word-finally, which is a characteristic that is lacking in RP (Bansal and Harrison 33). For instance, the word *cab* /kæb/ is pronounced with a partially devoiced final sound [kæb̥]., *code* /kəʊd/ as a [kəʊd̥] and *bag* /bæg/ as a [bæg̥].



Consonant Clusters and Epenthesis

Epenthesis—the insertion of a vowel—is very common in IE when it comes to consonant clusters that are complex: *film* → ['fɪləm], *text* → ['tɛksət]. This pattern is in line with the phonotactic norms of Indian languages, which usually have CV or CVC syllable structures (Roach 90). This type of conversion facilitates the production of speech and brings a regular rhythm.

Vowels

Vowel Inventory and Quality

The standard British English (RP) system is composed of twelve monophthongs (pure vowels) and eight diphthongs. IE modifies the system in such a way that it often merges or monophthongizes the diphthongs. As an example, the realization of *face* is changed from /eɪ/ to [e], and that of *goat* from /əʊ/ to [o]. The RP /æ/ in *trap* is frequently substituted with either [a] or [ɛ], thus reflecting that most Indian languages lack the /æ/ sound (Ladefoged and Johnson 86). Like RP, short and long pure vowels such as /i/ in *ship* and /i:/ in *sheep* or /ɒ/ in *cot* and /ɔ:/ in *caught* are not distinguished in Indian English. Both sounds are neutralized in the length distinction.

The *trap*–*bath* split, which refers to the difference between /æ/ and /ɑ:/ in RP, is generally merged in IE, resulting in both *class* and *trap* being pronounced with [a]. The *lot*–*cloth* merger, in a similar way, leads to a decrease in the number of the back vowel distinctions.

RP tense and lax vowels differ in both quality and quantity (e.g., /i:/ vs /ɪ/). Indian English does not always distinguish the length of vowels as vowel duration in Indian languages is phonemic but differently distributed. Besides that, vowel reduction is quite rare in IE: unstressed vowels hold their quality thus giving “full” vowels where RP uses schwa /ə/. Hence, *banana* in IE [bə'nɑ:nɑ] vowels are all full in different syllables while in RP [bə'nɑ:nə] the final vowel is reduced. Most of the Indian speakers do not distinguish between long /ə:/ as in *bird*, short /ə/ as in *ago* and strong /ʌ/ as in *cup*. These are often replaced by /a/ as in *cup*–/kap/.

Such a feature is a contributing factor to IE's syllable-timed rhythm and more explicit articulation which some scholars believe to be of pedagogical intelligibility benefits (Roach 115).

Supra-segmental Features

Rhythm: Syllable-timed vs Stress-timed

One of the main perceptual differences that can be easily noticed is the difference in rhythm between IE and BE pronunciations. RP is stress-timed that refers to the time between the stressed syllables is nearly the same, which results in the reduction of vowels and shortening of unstressed syllables (Roach 118). Indian English, on the other hand, is a syllable-timed language: syllables are pronounced at almost equal intervals no matter where the stress is (Kachru 61). Such a rhythmic regularity allows for clear pronunciation and very little vowel reduction.

Thus, the RP sentence 'I am going to the market' is shortened into [aɪəm'gɔɪntəðə'mɑ:kɪt] while IE almost always keeps the full syllables [aɪ æm 'gɔ:ɪŋ tu: ðə 'mɑ:rkɛt]. The difference in question gives rise to the characteristic prosodic rhythm of IE which is often described as "evenly paced".

Stress Patterns

Phonemic and lexically distinctive are the main features of stress in RP, however, in Indian English the stress is mostly predictable, for instance, it is usually on the penultimate syllable, which is in harmony with the Sanskrit stress rules. As an illustration, the word "photograph" might be uttered as ['fəʊtəgrɑ:f] instead of RP ['fəʊtəgrɑ:f], and "development" as [de'veləpmənt] rather than [dɪ'veləpmənt]. Such a regular pattern of variation is due to transfer of prosodic features from L1 rather than L2 random stress placement (Schneider 119).

Intonation and Pragmatic Functions

The intonation patterns of Indian English are quite different from those of RP. In fact, RP employs falling tones in declaratives and rising ones in interrogatives, whereas IE frequently has a rise or fall-rise even in statements, thus generating a unique tune. Besides forming questions, rising tones may also express politeness, hesitation, or giving confidence (Ladefoged and Johnson 95).

This conversational flexibility in intonation serves the purpose of a pragmatic device: rising contours in Indian English can be used to soften imperatives ("Please come here?") or show that one is involved rather than expressing doubt. Hence, not only do IE intonational patterns signify different structures, but they also distinguish different communication manners of the culture that stresses respect and indirectness.



Phonotactics and Syllable Structure

Phonotactic patterns in IE are the set of behaviors that mostly show how much influence native syllable templates had on them. The majority of Indian languages forbid complex clusters, mainly those word-final ones. Therefore, IE speakers simplify clusters by either insertion or deletion. *Acts* may be phonetically produced as [ækt̪sə] or [æks], thus matching allowed structures in L1 phonologies (Bansal and Harrison 40).

In many cases final consonants are definitely released and sometimes a slight schwa is added after them, thus giving *cat* the sound [kæt̪ə]. RP, on the other hand, permits unreleased or cluster-final consonants. These rearrangements of the lexical items change the rhythm, clarity, and length of the IE syllables and thus define the prosody as different and regionally marked.

Pedagogical Implications

In India, comparative phonological knowledge plays an important role in the effective teaching of English. A traditional method of teaching based on RP or “standard” British pronunciation often fails to recognize the authenticity of the different local varieties. Learners who are made to imitate RP may lose their confidence and thus develop linguistic insecurity (Trudgill 210) which is a negative effect.

The teaching instead should be therefore centered on intelligibility and communication where these two terms are the main priorities of the language learning process. The teachers can work on the segmental contrasts which significantly change the meaning of the utterance (for example, /v/ vs /w/, /ʃ/ vs /s /), introduce the concept of vowel reduction in global English and rhythm teaching for the purpose of listening comprehension (Roach 145).

Contrastive analysis can make learners more able to identify systematic L1 influences and at the same time they can have better receptivity by listening to different English accents. Besides that, the adoption of IE as a standard English can help the teachers to be on the same sociolinguistic level with their students and promote linguistic self-respect (Kachru 90).

IV. DISCUSSION

The comparison of phonologies uncovers that Indian English is not a substandard or deviant variety but rather a stable and rule-governed one. The consonant structures of the language demonstrate the effects of transfer in a very predictable manner—retroflexion, dentalization, and rhoticity—whereas the vowel structures are indicative of the language being structurally simplified and without the process of reduction. On the suprasegmental plane, IE is distinguished by syllable-timed rhythm, very predictable stress, and intonation pattern which reflects the culture of the speaker.

These characteristics make Indian English intelligible in Indian multilingual contexts and surely, they are becoming more and more valid for international communication considering that the number of the speakers of IE is increasing worldwide. Schneider (189) explains the global acceptance of local Englishes as the main factor which is changing the concept of a standard accent.”

However, even if we take this global perspective into account India still has different regional accents and therefore variation exists within the country. Besides regional variation, educational and socio-economic factors also have an effect on the accentual diversity. Features characteristic of RP or General American were more or less likely to be found in the speech of the Urban elites, while the strong substrate influence was the main feature of the regional varieties. The internal diversity that is still present shows the social stratification of the English language and the fact that it is not only a means of communication but also a linguistic marker of identity and aspiration.

V. CONCLUSION

The differences in the phonology of British and Indian English highlight that the latter has changed to a consistent and comprehensible system with its own standards and inner harmony. The differences in IE and BE, i.e. in segmental articulation, vowel quality, rhythm, or intonation, all arise from a system of phonological adaptation, sociolinguistic dynamics, and identity formation.

It is more worthwhile to consider IE as an independent variety which adds to the diversity of World Englishes rather than comparing it with RP. Its recognition as a legitimate variety of English is very helpful for inclusive pedagogy and decolonized linguistic attitudes. Incoming research can consider acoustic phonetics and perception studies to have more



evidence of different regional varieties of Indian English and to gauge the degree of mutual intelligibility within India and even with other countries.

Indian English phonology which has been influenced by interactions between cultures for the last few centuries is not, in fact, a phonology of British English but a sign of linguistic creativity and a proof of postcolonial agency - a demonstration of the adaptability and resilience of language in contact.

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