
Butler English

PRIYA HOSALI

An account of a highly distinctive variety of English in India

WHEN THE British set up colonies worldwide they brought with them a legacy that included their language, which many of the natives accepted and acculturated: it would after all be unreasonable to expect an imperial language to function in a vacuum with no local nuances. Indeed, gradual acculturation produced a number of varieties of English used as second languages. In their almost 200 years of not-so-peaceful stay on the subcontinent, the British and many Indians used English, fulfilling in at least a linguistic sense Macaulay's dream of an 'imperishable empire'. In these 200 years, English in India slowly went through a process now labelled *Indianization*, evolving into the variety (or group of varieties) called *Indian English*. One subvariety, generally referred to as *Butler English*, though by no means confined to butlers, is described and discussed here.

Introduction

The English language as used in India comprises a network of varieties ranging from regional and occupational varieties on the one hand to standard Indian English on the other. This article focuses on a variety traditionally spoken by native servants when communicating with their English-speaking masters. Because the head of the domestic staff of a European household in India used to be called the *butler*, this variety acquired the name *Butler English*.

Scarcely any samples of Butler English have been published. Indeed, the late nineteenth-century German armchair linguist Hugo Schuchardt is the only scholar in imperial times who tried to obtain samples of it. In his article *Indo-English* (1891) he gives a sample of Butler English, in which discovery has been made of a butler stealing large quantities of his master's milk, purchasing the silence of the subordinate servants by giving them a share of

the loot. This is how the family's *ayah* (nurse) explains the transaction to her *memsahib*:

Butler's yevery day taking one ollock for ownself, and giving servants all half half ollock; when I am telling that shame for him, he is telling, Master's strictly order all servants for the little milk give it – what can I say, mam, I poor ayah woman?

Schuchardt notes: 'In vain I have tried to obtain from Madras more substantial samples of this English written down with reasonable care. In recent years it has appeared to be on the wane.' However, when his sample is compared with excerpts from my own data (collected 1980–82), it shows that the variety is very much alive: Though the samples are separated by a century, they have many features in common, and additional recordings (1992–2002) endorse my earlier findings. The implication is that the sociocultural and linguistic setting in which this pidgin developed has not been wholly wiped out.

Reading through interviews with 20 of my

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'butlers', I find references to a large number from the general domestic hierarchy: head-barman, assistant-barman, and bar-steward; head-cook, soup-cook, or travelling-cook; plate-washer and glass-washer (also called *glass-cleaner*, *glass-bearer*, *glass-meti* or *meti-worker*). Other household chores are handled by the *butler*, *bearer* or *boy*; the *second-boy*, *house-boy*, *verandah-boy*, *room-boy*, *room-service-boy*, and *dressing-boy* (where *boy* means 'male servant'). *Boy* in the general sense of the word is in India *smallo-boy*.

The above is by no means a comprehensive list: it excludes a host of servants named after the multifarious duties they are expected to perform. Domestic service is thus far from being a dying profession, and Butler English has been stable enough to allow it to be described linguistically. In fact, it became so stereotyped that Professor Jolly, a much-published Sanskritist, Indianist and linguist, informed Schuchardt, in personal communication, that he saw an improvised farcical comedy on an English stage in Calcutta, which had imitations of Madras Butler English.

I also have extracts from a record made in 1935 by the Drape brothers for the Gramophone Company of India Limited, titled *The Cook and the Sahib*.

Where is that cook? Cook, cook. Cook come here.

Yes sir. Coming sir. What sir. ...I the only the servant working in six member sir.... Master call me one side, madam call me other side. Baba call me this side, missy call me that side. What I do go sir. If I do come to master, madam is getting angry, if I don't go to the baba, baba is giving me big big kicking. Missy too calling me dirty donkey.... This is very bad sir.

Shut up. You talk too much.

Oh! What sir. ...If I go to Philips, I will get big big good good work. ...All the big the big big Europeans I will work sir. They to say me – good good. You the only the master calling me fool, donkey, black monkey. Ah! That to my face sir.

Shut up will you. ... Butler.

Ah! What sir you calling the butler. What the big man thinking? What's all this tongue-wagging about butler? Pay him up, push him out: quick.

Data

The data discussed in this article is based on my books *Nuances of English in India: what the*

butler really said (1997) and *Butler English: form and function* (2000). It draws on the recorded speech of 75 domestics. The corpus comprises 275 foolscap typed pages of text containing 4,205 utterances recorded in natural settings. Data collection took place in Hyderabad, Bangalore, Madras, Mysore, Pondicherry, Goa, Dehra Dun and Simla, in hotels and in clubs: those hangers of colonial rule in India. Many domestic staff were from homes of friends known to the family for the last four decades. Some of the domestics were indeed very important, like the Nizam of Hyderabad's butler, the Dewan of Mysore: Sir Mirza Ismail's dressing-boy and the Maharajah of Mysore's cook. The names of some of the hotels and clubs where data was collected are:

- Percy's Hotel and Rock Castle Hotel in Hyderabad
- West End Hotel and Victoria Hotel in Bangalore
- Airport Restaurant in Madras
- Canopy Restaurant in Bangalore
- Secunderabad Club and Sailing Club in Hyderabad
- Bangalore Club
- Century Club
- Golf Club
- Turf Club
- Bowring Institute in Bangalore

Extracts

The extracts given below have been taken from domestics who have worked or are still working in the Secunderabad Club.

1st extract

Pentiaiah (reported age 42) speaks of his tradition of domestic service:

Yes ma'am. Small the boy is coming here – that tennis-boy. Start is the tennis-boy. Tennis-boy to the bar-boy – bar-boy to that coffee-room-boy – coffee-room-boy to plate-meti – plate-meti to silver-meti – that working. That talking the bearers. That bearer duty is that 16 years – yes that's all.

2nd extract

Raji (reported age 65) is in charge of the swimming-pool:

Swimming-pool because is the sahibs coming, want some clothes, and shorts, and clothes and towels. Then give it: give some money and

purse. And keep in my almirah. Then I bring: when they will finish their swim then give back again. Ha?

3rd extract

Gopal (reported age 67)

... working in the dining-room – working the bearer... just I going six month ago – dining-hall... attend after the drink – any sahibs coming. Morning-morning's 8 to 4. One time one week like that. One one week night.

4th extract

Thomas (reported age 22), adept at mixing drinks. He describes the process:

Bloody Mary's is – eh – tomato's juice, pepper, salt, pepper, salt eh rum, Worcester sauce, all mixing and what is the quantity. That is easy. Put it eh one slice lime also. Bloody Mary is red colour. That's tomato colour no. Tomato juice. Tom Collins. I will say whisky with sour – some fresh lime, whisky, soda.

5th extract

Pentiaiah tells us how to make tea.

That eh Brooke Bond's eh tea...that put it, and that tea in that...that top top tea-pot eh tea-pot. Put a little water, hot boil water. Milk separate and sugar separate. Keep it in tray.

6th extract

Narasimhaiah (reported age 45) does the same.

I told ma – separate tea, separate milk, separate sugar. If he asking cup of tea, I put first tea then asking madam how many tea – milk, how many sugar? That's all.

7th extract

Fixing a quick snack like an omelette on toast is quite an art. Raji says:

What the egg is doing? (laughter)... Omelette I know to do omelette like that...omelette over the – put break the eggs, then put them in the basin – small basin – and want to shake it up properly. Then after, then put in the fire.

8th extract

Anthony (reported age 74) seems to have mastered the culinary art of making soufflé:

Only for the English khana I cooked very well. Because that desi I don't know. Anything. Sweet? Sweet is is soufflé. Eggs you know – white – take the white

and beat it. Beat it, beat it, eh, then you put some there jelly in it, then mix it. Like to put some cream in it – put cream and sugar – and mix all in together – then put it in the ice. That get all right. Set.

9th extract

Many butlers gave their opinions about foreigners and some recounted their experiences. Gopal recalls:

Happy that British time that very happy madam. Now no (laughter)... Oh that time very nice. British time. Money is controlled price. Now rice is at a 1 kilo – 2.50. That time get 1 rupee 8 kilo. British time. ... Lot of money that is all cheaper. Take eh ones any clothes take 10 rupees you get 1 shirt 1 pant. Now 1 shirt 1 pant you take 100 rupees – no.

10th extract

And Anthony reminisces:

Really – they are very good – with their native peoples.

Plenty gentlemen. I got certificate in my house... name I don't know his name because plenty name...how can I tell them?

Other incidents of import in the lives of butlers are described by the following:

11th extract

Raji lost an eye when he went shooting with the sahibs:

I am go there shooting. (?)1927. They went to the shooting... to the... to jungle. There's some mistake on the the rifle. Ah! Yes madam. Yes. Shooting something birds. I went to the hospital. ...

12th extract

When asked: Your wife doesn't work?, he retaliates:

No, no. Staying home. But what eh good eh I send the job? I workin. What I send my wife to the job? Yeh my children. Yeh that she...I don't like to send the job.

13th extract

All the informants interviewed expressed a firm belief in God regardless of whether they were Christians, Muslims or Hindus. Narasimhaiah puts it succinctly:

God is good. He's there.

14th extract

Anthony says:

Christian, yes. Yes. Always I am going to church. Because eh I am church always church and always I am... you know the Rosary... always in keeping pocket.

But when I asked him to tell me a story from the Bible, he said:

(laughter) That I couldn't say for that. I don't know very much to say.

15th extract

Many of the butlers had strong political leanings. Thomas says:

Elections? Election? I hate elections first of all. No, I vote for Janata [a political party] madam... waisa wise man Jawaharlal Nehru. Then eh again her her daughter. Again her bloody son. Like that why?

16th extract

Narasimhaiah's views are quite the opposite. Our dialogue is reported here verbatim:

Did you vote?

No. Ah yes, ma.

Who?

Indira Gandhi.

Why?

Indira Gandhi helping for public. Helping Indira Gandhi, public.

Really? What does she do for you?

Not meself, ma: all the peoples. Poor peoples. Poor peoples also help.

These snatches of conversation reveal that butlers, with their minimal competence in English fulfil the basic function of language – communicative. They are, however, a far cry from P. G. Wodehouse's legendary creation Jeeves, with his impeccable English. Butler English is a mix of English and Indian languages. It is derived from standard English by two interlinked processes: reduction and simplification. And the Indian butler is aware of his shortcomings.

17th extract

Paul expresses embarrassment when he says:

...but there is think there is no grammar. It is Butler English I thought. ...You want to how – what I'm telling, they want to know. What they're telling we want to know. That's all. No problem about its spelling or grammar – we don't bother about...

How did they acquire this smattering of English?

18th extract

Pentaiah says:

English just like that here – the club ... somebody members it... talk to him and that.

19th extract

Narasimhaiah when asked 'How do you know English then?' answers:

Training ma'am. Training, training. In the club... 1945. I am working here.

He also worked for the British.

Cameroon Manchester. Little boy. That time little boy. I know that Camerooni...

20th extract

Gopal says:

I know the British time I come here. Yes, all British officer that time.

21st extract

Anthony, when asked 'How did you learn English? You went to school?', responds with a guffaw:

No. no (laughter). That is Bearer English. Only for nearly for 3–4 years I was in school. After I leave this school and come this bearer job. Yes. With the British time I am a bearer with them. ... They always talk English because they don't talk... they don't talk all Tamil this and that. They always talking in English only.

Although all the butlers were polyglots – they had at least a nodding acquaintance with three or more Indian languages – their English had invariably been learnt in the workplace. Butler English then is a jargon that has been handed down from one generation to another.

If one is to gather life-like data, it is necessary to be an insider. This interviewer had that advantage as many of the domestics were personally known to her.

22nd extract

Sandy, a jolly barman (reported age 51) who worked in the Bangalore Golf Club when asked 'You you know me?' says:

I know Hosali. (laughter) Yes. All (laughter)... small baby Hosali sahib ke house... mother I know very well madam. Daddy all everybody I know. Daddy still come night: How are Sandy my old friend? The happy madam. We all enjoy.

Uneducated speakers	Less well-educated speakers	Educated speakers
guides vendors domestic staff of hotels/ clubs/westernized Indian households	clerks pleaders magistrates	civil servants educationists journalists creative writers leaders of opinion in society
Butler English	Baboo English/Indian English	Standard Indian English
Pidgin Characteristics	English	British Standard
Zero point	Central point	Ambilingual point

A cline of bilingualism

Indian English, as referred to at the beginning of this article, is said to comprise a network of varieties, ranging from Butler English and Baboo English on the one hand to standard Indian English on the other. The competence of the speakers of these different varieties varies so much that it is difficult to analyse them without some prior categorization. It has, therefore, been suggested that English-knowing bilinguals should be ranked on a scale so that one can separate them on the basis of their competence in the different modes of English. In some studies of Indian English the term *cline of bilingualism* has been used. This cline comprises three measuring points: the zero point, the central point and the ambilingual point. These three points present a gradation towards an educated form of Indian English, as indicated in the accompanying diagram.

Evidence for the type of continuum outlined for India is to be found in many European-dominated areas in the colonial era, such as the West Indies, West Africa, Hawaii and parts of Papua New Guinea.

Variation

This account of Butler English would not be complete without some reference to the inherent variability that butlers reveal in the use of more standard and less standard forms. Le Page (personal communication, 1981) suggests that my butlers may have a knowledge or a repertoire of two systems: one of these may be a fairly stable pidgin, which does not make use of inflections (example: *six month ago; daddy still come night*) or copular constructions (example: *I very poor lady*) while the other is more like standard English.

It may be that informants are more at home in the pidgin variety but have some partial

knowledge of a more standard system and, therefore, add some of these features to their pidgin from time to time when for some reason they wish to sound more like standard English speakers.

What is the future of Butler English, born 200 years ago in slavery? Will it ever achieve status as normative in its own right? This is unlikely, as pidgins/creoles – poor relations in the world's language families, and like Cinderella relegated to the scullery and the kitchen – have long been dismissed as hotch-potch languages. Butler English will always be measured against the contemporary version of the native speaker model to which standard Indian English is closest, namely British Standard English; and found to be different (if the researcher is sympathetic); deviant (if the researcher insists on using a rigid normative yardstick); or deficient (if a non-objective viewpoint is adopted). And if tomorrow it becomes extinct, it will not be because of any intrinsic linguistic inadequacy but because it could not compete against the overwhelming pressures of standard English. ■

Note

I am grateful to the secretaries and committees of clubs for giving me permission to record Butler English.

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SNIPPETS 1

From the internet: Using quality

Milwaukee, WI, Oct. 15, 2004 – The American Society for Quality (ASQ) announced a new tagline to coincide with the launch of its image campaign.

ASQ tagged the line *Make Good Great*[™] to illustrate the work of those who use quality every day to improve our society, from teachers in classrooms, to doctors and nurses in hospitals and clinics, to factory managers and workers, to service providers and government officials.

‘Our new tagline exemplifies the universal nature of quality,’ said Daniel M. Duhan, ASQ president. ‘It communicates the role that quality plays in business, society, and in people’s personal lives – it captures the spirit of continuous improvement in all walks of life. No matter where, the practice of quality makes good products and services, great.’

The new tagline also reflects and reinforces ASQ’s vision, ‘By making quality a global priority, an organizational imperative, and a personal ethic, the American Society for Quality becomes the community for everyone who seeks quality technology, concepts, or tools to improve themselves and their world.’ The tagline first appeared publicly in the September 2004 edition of *Fast Company*, in the first of ASQ’s national campaign of advertisements.

The Milwaukee-based integrated communications agency, Kohnke Hanneken, was engaged by ASQ to develop the new presence, which will be integrated into ASQ’s signage, advertising, and marketing.

The American Society for Quality is the world’s leading authority on quality. With more than 100,000 individual members and 800 organizational members, the professional association advances learning, quality improvement, and knowledge exchange to improve business results, and to create better workplaces and communities worldwide. As champion of the quality movement, ASQ offers technologies, concepts, tools, and training to quality professionals, quality practitioners and everyday consumers. Headquartered in Milwaukee, the 58-year-old organization also administers the U.S. Commerce Department’s Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award and is a founding partner of the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), a prominent quarterly economic indicator.

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