
English in private letters in India

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Some aspects of a corpus of personal correspondence

ENGLISH as used in business letters, job applications and different types of bureaucratic communication in India has become more or less standardized and is not much different from the language of similar letters written elsewhere in the English-speaking world. But this is not the case with private letters, which are intimate, informal and often lax. Since a personal letter is written to a friend, spouse or relative, the writer comes out with his/her 'real self' in the use of language. It may therefore be taken as an authentic indication of the extent to which one is proficient in English and also the extent to which nativised features of English in this specific genre are attributable to native socio-cultural factors. What follows is a description and analysis based on a scrutiny of language used in a corpus of some 300 private letters written by those having a minimum of ten years of formal education in the English language in North India.

Forms of address

It is customary to begin a letter with a form of address which serves to initiate a sequence of communicative acts. The address forms in our corpus are more numerous, varied and imaginative than, perhaps, those in British or American English. An Indian letter writer generally takes liberty with the stereotyped forms as they are found inadequate for expressing his/her feelings for the addressee.

Consider the following: *Dearie*, *My deary*, *Dear Luv*, *Dear sweetheart*, *My dear toy*, *Sushma dear*, *My most sensible man of the century*, and finally, *Ex-dear Rajiv*. The use of *deary* or *dearie* is considered dated and old-fashioned in contemporary British English. *My most sensible man of the century* is an exaggerated expression aim-

ing at flattering the loved one. The most unusual address form in the list is *Ex-dear Rajiv* referring to someone who is no longer on friendly terms with the letter writer. One can informally say *ex-husband*, *ex-wife* or just *ex*, meaning a person who is no longer one's wife, husband or lover as in the sentence: "Two of my exes have left the country." But *Ex-dear Rajiv* is a rare usage. *Ex*, as a rule, is combined with a noun and not an adjective as in the present case.

The terms of address used in love letters by romantically inclined Indian youths are often highly emotive, bizarre and even humorous. While, on the one hand, we have a simple straightforward mode of address, *My dear Rani*, there are on the other hand loaded expressions: *Dear Dynamite*, *Dear Sumo Champion*, *My dear Galaxy*, *My dear toy*, *My soul-mate* and *My part-apart*. Among the juicy address forms mention may be made of *My mast-mast* ("sexually excited") *Abha*, *My Sweetest Cherry Pie*, *My Jan* ("life") *Tootie Fruiti*, *My Honey Due*, and *My Yummy Chocolate*. The term *My dear toy* presumes a fiancé to be an object of amusement. This may remind one of *doll*, the word used by men, particularly in the U.S. as a

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term of address to a woman, especially one considered attractive. Even the language of science is exploited for the purpose when a lover is addressed as *My dear Mr O2* and his beloved calls herself *Yours H2O*. How apt and meaningful the Union! A lover is never tired of using flattering words in the superlative: *My nearest, dearest, cutest, loveliest, hauntiest, tastiest, wittiest, crunchiest, munchiest Tannu*. In a humorous vein a fiancé is addressed as *My Idiotini* (where *ni* is a suffix in Hindi for making the feminine gender) and the writer calls himself *Tumhara* ("Your") *Idiot*. In a similar vein, an object of love is addressed as *Hi Ass, Hi Fool, Hi Bastard*. These terms of abuse turn into terms of endearment while addressing a very intimate friend. The address usage in private letters thus expresses and reinforces different aspects of an intimate, informal relationship in sociolinguistic terms.

Salutations

Personal letters written in most Indian languages have a pattern in which a term of address is followed by a salutation or greeting appropriate to the context. This convention has also been adopted in letters written in English. In keeping with the Indian etiquette, the following salutations have been noted in our corpus: *Hari Om* (a formula invoking God), *Reverence to Ganesh* (an expression of respect towards the elephant-headed god Ganesh), *Sat Sri Akal* (the greeting among Sikhs, referring to God), *Sadar Pranam* ("respectful bowing"), and *Charansparsh* ("touching your feet"). The salutation is either in the name of a deity seeking his blessings for the addressee or in the form of an expression of respectful regards. The practice of starting a letter with salutations of this sort is non-existent in the native varieties of English.

The greeting *How are you?*, normally used in face-to-face interaction, is sometimes the opening sentence of a letter, also verbalised as "How is life?", "How is life treating you?", and "How is life spinning at your end?" Since the verbs "treat" and "spin" do not usually collocate with "life", these sentences provide further evidence to the liberty taken with the accepted usage. Thus, even in personal letters, greeting serves as a mode of entering upon or manipulating a relationship in order to achieve a specific result" (cf. Goody 1972:40).

Acknowledgement

It is elementary courtesy to acknowledge a letter with thanks, and an Indian letter writer does so with considerable gusto and extravagant generosity. The following examples may be noted:

Thanks a heap for your kind invitation.
 Thanks a pile for your letter.
 Thanks a ton for your long awaited letter.
 Thanks awefully for your letter.

Although such a manner of thanks-giving is less common among native speakers of English, it is by no means unknown. *Thanks a heap* may be fairly idiomatic in the UK, but *Thanks a ton* and especially *Thanks a pile* are less likely. By and large, a unit of measurement denoting a specific weight does not normally go with thanks. *Thanks a pile* is therefore far-fetched, while *Thanks awefully* must be a visual play on *aweful* and a now rather old-fashioned upper-class British way of intensifying one's statement of gratitude, on the same lines as *awfully nice*.

Contents

The contents of a personal letter represent a wide spectrum of topics relating to the writer and the addressee and ranging from very private to very general matters. One finds a variety of queries posed to the addressee in the course of writing. If, for instance, the letter is from an elder in the family, the queries and concern are regarding the health and well-being of the addressee:

Trust you are in perfect health.
 Wish this to reach you in the pink of health.
 How is body?
 How is your tooth which was giving you trouble?
 How is your hair-growth now, thicker as before or not?
 I hope you are eating properly.
 I hope you will keep your nose up in your studies.
 Hope this letter finds you in good mood.

The expression *in the pink of health* signifying *in excellent health* is a common Indianism. The phrase in standard British English with a similar meaning is *in the pink*, which is used only humorously. Incidentally, in a survey conducted by the present writer, the phrase *in the pink of health* evoked a variety of responses regarding its acceptability among native speakers of English in the U.K. The responses range

from “unacceptable”, “vulgar” and “anti-quoted” to “acceptable”, “very upper class” and “a cast-iron idiom” (Mehrotra 1982: 170). It is evident that native speakers of English are not unanimous in their pronouncements on the acceptability of an Indian English usage.

“How is body?” is a queer way of enquiring “How is your health?” Furthermore, the lack of the determiner “your” makes the sentence not only grammatically incorrect but also confusing. Thick hair-growth is regarded in India as a sign of health and beauty. The sentence “I hope you are eating properly” occurs in a letter written to a student residing in a hostel or hall of residence. Normally, such a remark can be expected when a person is having a tooth-ache or sore throat. But, in the present context, the writer wonders if his ward is getting good and nourishing food in his hostel. Every parent wants to see his or her son or daughter shine in studies with flying colours. Hence the remark “I hope you will keep your nose up in your studies”, which is a literal translation of the Hindi idiom *naak uunchl rakhanaa*, meaning “to keep one’s prestige high”. In contemporary British English we have the phrases *to keep your nose clean* and *to keep your nose to the grindstone*, but not *to keep your nose up*, which is a typical Indianism.

Love letters

When the parties in correspondence are young boys and girls in love with each other, one notices a different kind of stuff and style. In a love letter, a paramour gets praised to the skies with high-sounding words, fascinating figures of speech, and multiple adjectives mostly in the superlative:

You are the oxygen for my lungs, the blood for my veins and the beat of my heart.
Dive deep into my eyes and you will find an ocean of love and in it a boat of friendship waiting for you for a non-stop journey to the core of my heart.

The rhapsodies of praise at times turn hysterical:

Jaya, my part-apart, never depart or I will make me part-part.
You are my passion, my fascination, my inspiration.
You are a fantabulous person. Lots of love, love, love, love, love, love.

The word *love* is repeated here half a dozen

times. At times, the writer’s feeling of love and adulation makes him at a complete loss for words:

I sat down to write a poem about you but can a poem be written about a poem?

At last he makes recourse to analogies:

I am drawn to the nectar of your love like a humming bird to an orchid.
You are the harbour of my love. Let me be the permanently anchored ship in your harbour.

Even the language of computers is used for the purpose:

Today my system is refusing to boot up with anyone except you. Please insert the floppy of love to prevent its hang-up.

The zealous lover sometimes turns poetic in his letter:

My heart is a cottage divided into two,
Outside for everyone, inside for you.

Thus, in the private letters of young lovers one notices the paramount presence of love with all its aspects and manifestations: romance, excitement, emotional outbursts, and challenges.

Closing of a letter

The closing of a personal letter in India, like its opening, has a design of its own which does not necessarily follow the pattern of a letter written by native speakers of English. The entire design, however, forms part of a politeness strategy to impress upon the addressee that he or she enjoys the tremendous love and care of the writer.

One of the common items included in the closing section of a letter is a request for an early reply. Among the multiple ways of verbalising this request, the following may be noted:

Write if you have time.
Hoping to hear from you soon.
I shall deem it a favour if you would send a prompt reply.

While the first sentence may be deemed impolite, the last, which is extra-polite, may seem to belong more appropriately to the sub-register of formal communication.

Very often the end portion of a personal letter contains a two- or three-word phrase or sentence intended to serve as a closing signal,

often resembling that of a piece of conversation:

Bye-Bye.	So long.
Bye for now.	See you.
Cherio for now.	

However, these exclamations for *Good Bye* are not supposed to figure in the written mode.

It needs to be pointed out here that the closing phrase having the maximum frequency of use in personal letters is *Rest is OK*. Some other phrases with *rest* are:

Rest is fine.	Rest on meeting.
Rest is well.	Rest in person.
Rest as usual.	Rest is same.

The message conveyed by all these phrases is that whatever news and views deserve the attention of the addressee have already been given in the letter.

Personal letters demonstrate multiple uses of *OK*. The word is used in a variety of contexts and with several meanings. It is normally used as an adjective meaning all right or satisfactory:

My health is OK.
My attendance is OK.
The banana plants are OK.

It is also used in the sense of *agreed or acceptable*, as in:

As soon as the map is ready, I'll send you one, OK?

Yet another use of *OK* is in the sense of *yes*:

OK, then I'll sign off here.

It is also used to denote recovery from illness:

Hope you are OK now by God's grace.

Also interesting is the manner in which a letter writer conveys his or her intention to close the letter:

I'll cap my pen now.
Now I better put a brake.
I'm not getting any matter to write further.
Wishing you for the best I end my scribble.
I have to end now, cos I'm in great hurry.
More in next.
Over to Mummy.

Thus, instead of saying in a straightforward manner "I must stop writing now", the writer prefers round-about and non-conventional ways of saying the same thing. The word *scribble* appropriately denotes the nature, fast and careless, of writing the letter. The phrase *Over*

to *Mummy* is a case of double transfer: one from the spoken mode to writing and another from the register of conversation by radio or telephonic talk to that of a personal letter. The writer, who in this case is writing a letter to his father, now wishes to pass on or write to his mother.

It is interesting to note that towards the end of a letter the writer does not always introduce himself with the usual phrase *Yours sincerely* or *Yours truly*. Sometimes, he takes liberty with the conventional usage and writes: *Yours friendly*, *Yours slowly dying friend*, and *Yours waitingly*. The phrase *Yours waitingly* is a curious formation combining *Waiting for your early reply* with *Yours truly/sincerely*. The formation is rare and ingenuous and goes beyond the set rules of word-formation.

The colloquial element

Personal letters generally abound in colloquial flavour. A letter writer imagines himself/herself to be interacting face-to-face with the addressee. The greater the intimacy between the interacting dyad, the larger the colloquial input. Verbal features and stylistic nuances which characterize speech are allowed to sneak into private correspondence, inadvertently. Some of them are described below.

Specific speech sounds and their effects are conveyed through writing which is intended to represent speech. The following sentences from personal letters illustrate this point:

He's so-o-o boyish looking.
Ha, Ha, Ha, got bored?
Now stop giggling and wiggling like a jelly fish.

In the first sentence an effort is made to give the impression of the lengthening of the vowel sound in "so" for the sake of emphasis. The charming boyish look of the person under reference is intensified by this stylistic device. "Ha, Ha, Ha" is a humorous exclamation resembling the sound of laughter. It expresses joy at the imagined discomfiture of the addressee. While "giggling" denotes continuous laughter in a childish way, "wiggling" suggests quick movements from side to side, both the activities presume the physical presence of the person being addressed.

Another element of speech mannerism commonly observable in personal letters is a series of pause fillers such as *Well*, *Listen*, *By the way*, *What else?*

Well, I'm fine over here.
Listen, due to certain happenings...
I was mentally troubled.
By the way, how is Usha?
What else? Write soon.

Similarly, the Hindi question tag *na* in the sentence, as for example when *Too many questions, na?* signifies "aren't there?" and is normally spoken speech than written. Furthermore, the use of the word *grub* for "food", *guy* for "person" and *buck* for "rupee" also contributes to the colloquial flavour:

Our hostel grub is rotten.
You guys will have to pay for it.
It was priced about 40 bucks.

This informal style leads us on naturally to slang.

Slang

Personal letters written to close, chummy friends make frequent use of slangy usages and even abuses charged with emotion. Consider the following:

I was worrying like hell.
It is hell of a tiring job.
I miss BHU like hell of a lot.
I don't know what the hell it means.
How the hell do I thank you now?

These very informal expressions are more common in spoken language. The phrases *like hell* and *like hell of a lot* denote "very strongly". Similarly, *hell of a tiring job* signifies an "extremely tiring job". The expressions *What the hell* and *How the hell* are suggestive of the difficulty and even disgust that the task involves. Incidentally, *thanks* and *hell* do not go together. Thanking someone in this manner may sound discourteous. Another related expression frequently occurring in personal letters is *helluva* which very informally suggests the meaning "excessive", "in a big way":

Thanks helluva a lot for it.
You guys will have one helluva time feasting eyes.

Once again, the letter writers have taken liberty with the correct form of the phrase, which is "a helluva...", as in a *helluva good time*.

Sometimes, we come across slangy terms of address and reference in personal letters:

You bastard!
Understand you bum?
Hello, long cock!

So, chootiya (Hindi term of abuse)! When are you coming?
You fucking son of a bitch!

These terms of abuse in any other context would be considered highly objectionable, worthy of strong protest, but in the present context of close relationship they are intended to serve as terms of endearment reinforcing a chummy relationship.

Indian English features

The language of personal letters demonstrates some of the distinguishing features of Indian English, both lexically and syntactically. Some users of English in India have been particularly prone to pomposity and verbosity in the use of language, which is also reflected in personal letters. The following sentences are illustrative:

How are you elapsing your time?
I received a communication from you yesterday.
How are the exams treating you?
After you left I became letter-rich.

The use of *elapsing* for "spending," and *communication* for "letter" suggests that the writer has little regard for the simple, straightforward and precise mode of expression. This is even more prominently discernible in *How are the exams treating you?* One is normally treated by a human being, not by education or an examination.

Certain usages in our corpus may appear unintelligible and even unacceptable to a native speaker of English. We may in this context note the following:

She has passed B.A. examination in the royal division.
The Maths Sir enquired about your progress.
I had also put the postal tickets in the envelope.
The water of Gorakhpur is not congenial for my health.

The phrase *royal division*, which denotes the third or lowest division (less than 45% marks in an examination), is a case of euphemism. While *Sir* is used by school children in Britain to address a male teacher, in India it is used even by college and university students to refer to a male teacher. Furthermore, the clubbing together of the name of a subject with *Sir* as in *Maths Sir* and *Economics Sir* is another interesting example of Indian English usage. A further popular Indianism is the use of *ticket* to denote "stamp". The word in this sense has also been borrowed in Hindi and other Indian languages.

However, the use of the word *water* in the sense of “climate” shows the pull of Hindi, the writer’s mother tongue. Many such usages may be dubbed as deviant by native speakers of English. Perhaps “variant” would be a more appropriate label to describe them.

A significant syntactic feature of the language used in personal letters is topicalization or fronting, in which the usual word order (SVO) is reversed and the object is brought to the front position:

Your regards I’ll convey and you do the same
for me.
His address I’ll let you know in my next letter.
Just a starter I am, technically.
About Allahabad I shall write later on.
One inland I had already posted (where *inland*
is short for “inland letter”).

In addition, it needs to be pointed out that, contrary to the usual practice, the purpose of fronting in the above sentences is not to give importance or emphasis to the item brought to the front. The pattern is simply a case of transfer of a syntactic feature of Hindi to English.

Registral confusion

There are quite a few usages in personal letters that actually belong to other registers and domains. Usually, such registral confusion may be attributed to the writer’s ignorance of the appropriate variety of language use which goes with a given subject or specific context. For instance, a few expressions which belong to the register of formal official communication are used in the context of personal letters:

Received your letters and noted the contents
therein.
I am enclosing some prasadam herewith.

Prasadam is an offering of sweets, etc., made to a deity and later consumed by devotees by way

of divine blessing. What is generally enclosed with a letter is a document and not an eatable. The two do not therefore collocate. It needs to be pointed out here that letter-writing is an integral part of the English syllabus even at the school stage in India. Since the emphasis is on writing official letters, the learners, when they grow up, tend to transfer the registral features of official correspondence to personal letters resulting in registral confusion. Some other examples of confusion of this sort are given below:

I hope you have shaken off your cough.
Some how Lady Luck has checked out.

The personal letters under scrutiny here display a variety of lexical, syntactic and discoursal features that include innovations which may strike a native speaker of English as deviant. These may, however, be attributed to the decolonisation of English and explained in terms of indigenous socio-cultural factors. They also serve to demonstrate how the self in the East is different from that in the West. “The self in the East,” as Roger Brown rightly observes, “is said to be relational, interpersonal or collective whereas the self in the West is individualistic and autonomous (Brown 1996:39). ■

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Quotations for Sept. 11 and 9/11, continued: 2

Michael Elliott, *TIME Magazine* August 12, 2002: ‘They had a Plan’

Long before 9/11, the White House debated taking the fight to al-Qaeda. By the time they decided, it was too late....’