

---

# Some effects of Indian English on the language as it is used in Oman

BRIAN POOLE

Distinctive developments in an Arab sultanate

---

RELATIVELY few people around the world react with instant recognition when the Sultanate of Oman is mentioned. This may however be changing as international news media focus ever more strongly on events in the Arab world and on the strategic significance of the Persian Gulf. There are many who misunderstand the spoken word 'Oman' as 'Amman' and therefore think erroneously of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Oman, however, is a beautiful and hospitable country possessing white sand beaches, rugged mountain ranges, breathtaking cave systems, a long and somewhat surprising history, and an English of its own.

## Introduction

Oman lies at the south-eastern end of the Arabian peninsula, south of the United Arab Emirates, east of Saudi Arabia, north of Yemen, and with Muscat, its capital, facing Iran across the Gulf. Muslims (Ibadhi, Sunni, and Shia) account for approximately two and a half million of the population, and there are significant numbers of Hindu and Christian expatriates. The total population is currently estimated at just over three million, with about half a million 'residents' hailing from various parts of the Indian sub-continent. Indians hold many middle-ranking positions in private sector employment (for example in banking, insurance, car sales and the retail sector generally) and are prominent in both secondary and tertiary education. It is a two-hour flight from Muscat to Mumbai (Bombay) and trade and commercial links between the Sultanate and India are strong.

During the nineteenth century Oman exerted a strong influence on coastal parts of East Africa, including the areas around Mombasa (Kenya) and Zanzibar (part of present-day Tanzania). Indeed, for a short period from 1853, Zanzibar became the capital of Oman. These links between East Africa and Oman are evident today in the African features



---

*BRIAN POOLE is currently a quality assurance adviser at the Ministry of Manpower, in Muscat, the Sultanate of Oman. He has been, among other roles, a Senior Co-ordinator, Quality Assurance, at the university of the south Pacific in Suva, Fiji, and has taught applied linguistics and EFL at universities in the UK, Turkey, Thailand, and South Korea.*

of some Omanis and in the use of Swahili in the Sultanate, particularly among 'Zanzibari Omanis', who may have been born in East Africa or else can trace their family history to that region.

The relationship between Britain and Oman has a long history. In the mid-seventeenth century, the English were given exclusive trading rights at the Omani port of Sohar (or 'Suhar' – see map), and from at least the early nineteenth century the British maintained a 'Resident' in Muscat. In the modern era, the British are widely believed to have played a supporting role when the current sultan, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, took over from his father in a palace coup in 1970. The *CIA Fact Book* notes that Oman has maintained 'a longstanding political and military relationship with the UK'.

The various factors noted above have all played a role in shaping the varieties of English used in Oman. Indian varieties of English predominate, but the those used by British and other native-speakers and by citizens who have received schooling in East Africa also contribute to the mix.

### **The roles of the English language in Oman**

English has official approval as the second language of Oman. Al Issa (2006:4) quotes as follows from 'Reform and Development of General Education' (a document published by the Ministry of Education in Oman in 1995):

The government recognises that facility in English is important in the new global economy. English is the most common language for international business and commerce and is the exclusive language in important sectors such as banking and aviation. The global language of science and technology is also English as are the rapidly expanding international computerised databases and telecommunications networks which are becoming an increasingly important part of academic and business life.

Al Issa also notes that 'the Omani government has... opted for English as its only official foreign language' and accordingly it is universally taught in schools, and further and higher education is carried out through the medium of English, with very occasional exceptions in specific areas such as religious and cultural study. Al Bulushi (2001:5: as cited in Al Issa 2005:261) points out that, in Oman, English

has become 'the second language through which all economic, technological, vocational, educational and communication functions' are carried out. It should be noted that a high proportion of the teachers and lecturers whose teaching – in all sectors of education, and for almost all subjects – underpins the predominance of English are Indian.

There are three main English language daily newspapers: *The Times of Oman*, *The Oman Observer*, and *The Oman Tribune*. In addition, a free weekly newspaper, *The Week*, achieves wide circulation through collection points at supermarkets and other public places. Television and radio broadcasting in English are also extensive. Taking print and broadcast media as a whole, Indian journalists and presenters predominate.

In business and the professions, English is always the means of communication where non-Arabic speakers are involved. Shop and office signs are usually in both Arabic and English, and shopping at supermarkets and other large retailers can always be carried out in English. In addition to Arabic, such languages as Hindi, Urdu, Lawati, and Swahili can be heard in Oman, but all educated Omanis can operate in English, although some may be more proficient in speech than in writing. It is in effect the country's lingua franca.

### **Indian influences on English as used in Oman**

Indian varieties of English used in Oman often exhibit the lilting intonation patterns sometimes labelled 'Bombay Welsh'. There is also a tendency to place primary stress on the first syllable of a word, a tendency which may derive from Hindi. Hence, words such as *refer*, *prefer*, and *defer* rhyme with the British English pronunciation of the name 'Heffer' and, as such, exhibit first-syllable stress. The pronunciation of word-initial /t/ is often unaspirated and perceived as /d/ in words such as *ten* (as if 'den'). There is also a tendency to voice word-initial /k/ so that, for instance, *card* sounds like 'guard'. Indeed, speakers often produce retroflex consonants in such contexts, and this feature of pronunciation can be observed in the speech of a significant number of Omanis.

There are numerous grammatical differences between the Indian varieties of English used in Oman and standard varieties of UK English. Firstly, Indian English tends to use *would*

where British speakers or writers prefer *will*, as in:

- 1 The Minister would be arriving at about 3pm.

There is also a tendency to use the past perfect tense where UK English would normally employ the present perfect:

- 2 The good news is that she had released a new album last week.  
– Indian broadcaster on Radio Sultanate of Oman

Indian varieties of English sometimes use do where other varieties would be likely to omit it. For example:

- 3 We do have three more prizes to give away.  
– Indian broadcaster on Radio Sultanate of Oman

British English would only use do in a sentence of this kind when something was being disputed. The use of do would emphasise the truth of the proposition and override any previous assertions to the contrary. But in the example above, the speaker is simply stating a fact in a neutral way.

There are numerous cases where Indian varieties of English add a particle to a verb where British English would not. Omani examples of such usages abound:

- 4 List down the main points.
- 5 He stressed on the importance of considering all points of view.
- 6 The report emphasised on the need to seek efficiency gains.
- 7 Fatma said that she can't cope up with the increased workload.

Indian varieties of English treat countable nouns in a different way from other varieties. For example a noun such as *staff* (in the sense of those working in a particular organisation) often appears as *staffs* and instances of *evidences* and *advices* are both seen and heard. In addition, a sentence such as 'He gave me a good advice' is possible.

It is, however, at the level of lexis that Indian and Indian-influenced varieties of English differ most markedly from British, American or other varieties. Indian varieties continue to employ words and expressions which might appear quaint or old-fashioned to other speakers of the language. For example, the use of *avail* as a verb is noted in Poole (2001:124) in Muscat shop signs, as with:

- 8 Buy a fridge today and avail a 25% discount.

This example highlights two things: one that Indian speakers and writers of English use *avail* far from more frequently than do the British, and secondly that in Indian varieties of English some verbs take a direct object although they require other argument structures in British English. In the unlikely event of a British shop sign using the verb *avail* it would probably read:

- 9 Buy a fridge today and avail yourself of a 25% discount.

A similar phenomenon can be seen with the verb *alight*. It appears to be more frequently used in Indian English than in British English (where it may be regarded as rather old-fashioned) and in the former it can be used with a direct object ('He alighted the vehicle'). Other examples where Indian varieties employ with relative frequency words or phrases which may seem dated to British speakers include *esteemed* ('your esteemed institution'), *balm* (as a word for a medicine), *shift* as a verb meaning 'to move house', and the phrase *kindly do the needful* ('please take the required action'). Some of these uses may indicate that Indian English has preserved words and senses that were common in British English in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Since many teachers in Oman are Indian, such features of language use often transfer into the spoken and written English of Omanis. For instance, an Omani colleague at work, when referring to some statistics and pointing to a particular page in a draft report, told me:

- 10 I kept them in this table.

This is an attested feature of Indian English – see for instance Nihalani *et al* (1979:107) – yet is not infrequently heard and seen in the production of Omanis. Often Indian speakers use *keep* where British speakers would use *put*. In another example, an Indian secretary (from the southern Indian state of Kerala) told me (regarding a letter I was waiting for):

- 11 I kept it on your table. (The British English equivalent would probably be *I put it on your desk*.)

## Conclusion

There is as yet no standard guidance in Oman as to the variety of English to be taught or to be learned in the Sultanate, and officials in the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of

Higher Education no doubt take the pragmatic and reasonable view that as long as Omanis learn internationally acceptable forms of English there is little else to worry about. After all, countries such as Canada and Australia do not require their citizens to adhere rigidly to either American or British spelling and other usage.

The influences on English language use in Oman seem, at first sight, to be similar to those in other parts of the world. These include: the Internet; cinema; computer games; broadcast and print media; the English used by teachers; and the varieties of English in the textbooks and other materials used in schools. But in the case of Oman the significant proportion of Indian residents and their ubiquity in journalism, broadcasting and some other professional areas exerts a strong influence. What seems to be emerging is what Graddol (1997:56) refers to as a 'local form' or 'hybrid variety' of English, with features of the 'national standards' of the UK and the US, but also clear traces of Indian English. No doubt in the 21st ('Asian') century, when the economic power of India is almost certain to increase, its

near neighbour and long-term trading partner Oman will continue to be influenced by Indian varieties of the language. ■

### References

- Al Bulushi, R. 2001. 'ELT in the Sultanate of Oman.' In the *RELO Newsletter* 5, pp. 5–6.
- Al Issa, A. 2005. 'The role of English language culture in the Omani language education system: an ideological perspective.' In *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 18:3.
- Al Issa, A. 2006. 'The cultural and economic politics of English language teaching in the Sultanate of Oman.' In *Asian EFL Journal* 8:1.
- CIA Fact Book at <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/mu.html> (Accessed 7 Jun 06).
- Graddol, D. 1997. *The future of English?* London: British Council.
- Nihalani, P., R. Tongue, & P. Hosali. 1979. *Indian and British English*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Poole, B. 2001. 'Classroom observation, EAP course design, and the context for instructed English language learning in the Sultanate of Oman,' in P. Deshpande, ed., *Excellence in academic English*, pp.118–27. Muscat: Sultan Qaboos University.