

Word order and discourse organization in spoken Indian English

It has frequently been argued (e.g. Schneider 2007, Sedlatschek 2009) that the actual linguistic differences between the New or Outer Circle Englishes and the ‘Old’ or Inner Circle Englishes are quantitative rather than qualitative, with spoken language naturally allowing for more variation than written registers. This paper presents evidence for contact-induced language change in spoken Indian English in the realm of word order and discourse organization. The data to be analyzed come from the conversation files of the *International Corpus of English, Indian component* (ICE-India), a corpus representing the standard variety of Indian English. A quantitative as well as context-sensitive analysis reveals that syntactic features which cluster at the syntax-pragmatics interface, namely topicalization, left dislocation and the non-initial existential *there*-construction, are frequently motivated by topic continuity or “elliptical repetition” (cf. Subbarao et al. 1991), as the following examples demonstrate:

(a) Topicalization:

A: Uhm uhm <,> what about M A <,> do you teach M A also?

B: Yeah I teach <,> uh literature at <,> uh the M A level

A: **Literature** you teach

B: Yeah <,> (ICE-IND:S1A-060#4-7)

(b) Left dislocation:

B: No how did <,> how did you learn Hindi <,>

A: So **Hindi it** was compulsory for us <,> in uh

B: In the school

A: Yes yes in the school (ICE-IND:S1A-076#111-114)

(c) Non-initial existential *there*-construction:

B: Yeah eatables I think <,> *samosas* will do <,>

A: *Samosas* yeah that’s not a bad idea then the chips

B: Because they are chi uh cheap also <,>

A: Yeah **chips can be there** <,> (ICE-IND:S1A-062#85-88)

All constructions exemplified above serve to repeat an immediately preceding topic NP, a pan-Indian politeness device which has been identified by D’Souza (1988) as belonging to a common South Asian “grammar of culture”. The preference for these constructions correlates with speakers’ age and gender, but not significantly with educational level and speakers’ mother tongues: that is, we are dealing with a supraregional pattern in spoken Indian English which might constitute an ongoing change from below.

Thus, this paper demonstrates that New Englishes display not only quantitative, but also qualitative differences, and that discourse-pragmatic constraints play a crucial role in contact-induced language change.

References

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