Instilingo *Puts Intro*: A Study of Indian Variety of English

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Abstract

This paper focuses on highlighting certain linguistic and syntactical peculiarities of the slang that is spoken by the student community of IIT Madras. The community is notorious for its 'Insti Lingo' that has often been a cause for fraternization within itself. Through the paper, I hope to outline some peculiarities of vocabulary (by the different parts of speech) and grammar (construction of plurals and sentences) that, at times, function to give it the status of a dialect of English. Detaching itself from an understanding of language as a single, monolithic entity and looking beyond the categories that emerge from the naming and classifying of language as standard and non-standard language(s), the paper studies the syntactic and semantic features of instilingo through the lens of multilinguality. The paper, thus presents some features of the lingo and hence aims to provide a deeper insight of language, its nature and use. Written from the perspective of a 'native-speaker' of this particular slang, this paper holds certain claims to authenticity that previous literature upon this topic (which consists of very little) does not.

Keywords: Instilingo, slang, dialect, multiinguality, Indian Engish

Introduction

Languages emerge, sometimes markedly specific to a particular community which in myriad ways echoes their lifestyle, backgrounds, culture and geographical position. Language has many languages within itself. It requires unpacking of this idea; however, it could be summarized

in simple terms as Agnihotiri (2007) puts it as multilinguality. Over the years, the in-group vocabulary and language developed and used by the student community of IIT Madras is popularly known to them as *instilingo*. Demarcating itself with stark differences from the 'Normal English' through vocabulary and sentence constructions, *instilingo* has an independent and colourful life of its own. The only one existing research literature on instilingo is a linguistic study of the language as a student slang by Richter (2006) wherein the peculiarities of the language are often discussed as a lack of knowledge in 'normal' standard English, inability to pronounce or use certain words, resistance against certain vocabulary and laziness. Krishnamurthy and Kumar (2019) have theorized social rejection of institute lingo in the context of Humanities and Social Sciences pride while addressing larger issues of student identity and institute identity in the IITM student speech community.

A study of the fundamental structure of language in terms of its syntactic features, sequencing in sentence constructions and the semantic attributes is inevitable in the scientific study of any language(s). Detaching itself from an understanding of language as a single, monolithic entity and looking beyond the categories that emerge from the naming and classifying of language as standard and non-standard language(s), the paper studies the syntactic and semantic features of instilingo through the lens of multilinguality. The paper, thus presents some features of the lingo and hence aims to provide a deeper insight of language, its nature and use.

In the next section, we briefly explain the student culture and language of IITM using instilingo. This will help familiarize the basic vocabulary of the language used by the students. We will then set out to describe the features and peculiarities of instilingo at lexical, morphological, syntactic and semantic levels. These peculiarities, we argue, are the very nature of language. Languages are highly multilingual as they are flexible and fluid. For the students of IIT Madras, it is multilinguality which is constitutive of their identity. The seemingly mono verbal language has its own rules of plural constructions, borrows suffixes from local languages, is highly minimalistic and thus facilitates only necessary communication. These peculiarities of the language make instilingo an interesting study of syntactic and semantic patterns of language.

Before setting out to understand *instilingo* and the ways in which it is used, we wish to explore its location in existing literature. This section attempts to trace the concepts of idiolect and identity within scholarship on Indian English and multilinguality.

English has become an Indian language. Agnihotri (2010) argues that English in India should and will flourish in the company of other languages. Agnihotri, Khanna and Aahluwalia (1997) established through their research that even though people wanted to preserve their languages, they did wish to add English to their repertoire. Quite a few studies focused on Indian English such as Ch'ien (2004), Graddol (2010), Raghavan (2010) and Meganathan (2011) have extensively come up with detailed profiles of English in contemporary India. Ch'ien (2004) specifically examines the linguistic features of the 'weird English' constructed for literary purposes. Any deviation from the standard/ the so-called 'normal English' is seen as an aberration and hence called 'weird English'. However, the multilinguality theory of languages argue that classification of languages into standard language, non-standard idiolect/dialect/slang is a meaningless exercise as all languages (which includes the so-called idiolect, dialect and slang) showcases universal qualities such as minimalism, fluidity, flexibility and porousness. Given this context, the question we are going to address in this paper is—how does instilingo help us understand the multilingual nature of English emerging in India and different parts of our society?

Our methodological framework was characterized by a qualitative emphasis, with a focus on collecting as much data as possible thus producing ethnographic material on instilingo. We chose the qualitative method since 'qualitative research is often the most 'adequate' and 'efficient' way to obtain the type of information required and to contend with the difficulties of an empirical situation.' (Glaeser and Strauss 1967). The methods used in this project were: semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and field notes. In generating ethnographic research, we observed and noted the ways in which language was used by the students of IIT in different contexts. All the respondents we consulted are undergraduate and postgraduate students of IIT Madras and live on campus. The collected data was segregated, classified and studied through language analysis. They were analysed at the level of morphemes, lexicon, syntax and semantics.

Case Study—Lingo and Student Culture of IITM

Ragging[1], or as it is known these days, 'interactive' sessions are an inescapable part of college life and IIT Madras is no different. The first thing that any fresher would encounter in the initial weeks of his *insti life* (life in the institute) from his seniors as a part of these sessions is the notorious phrase *put intro* (introduce yourself). As the seniors command the fresher to *put intro*, the *freshie* (freshers), *as* expected from him, introduces himself in a format that the students of IITM have followed for a long time.[2] As per the format the *freshie* is supposed to tell his name, AIR (All India Rank), his *factory* (the coaching institute that has trained him for JEE), hobbies and the one thing that he thinks is special about him. At the end of the session, the seniors give him a nickname, after which he will forever be addressed by that name in the *insti*. Ranging from bhavander (cyclone) to diaper (sanitary pad), chances are that anything that falls between the earth and the sky might turn out to be the *nickname* or the *insti name* of the student. A sample of them are *Maadu, shotgun, avatar, neuro, kabha and samosa*. In most of the cases, *freshies* are not nicknamed randomly. Every nickname has a *funda* (explanation, in this case) behind it. They follow from the conversations they invariably encountered during the interactive session. For instance, during his interactive session, one particular freshie happened to use the phrase 'so and so' a lot more than needed and hence was nicknamed *so and so*.[3]

Life in campus, as the student would realize soon, is quite different from his/her days at home and in school. In the *insti* learning always begins with unlearning. What is taught to them at home and school as the cornerstone of 'proper' living, very soon begin to be seen as matters of least significance on the campus. Using broken English with a little instilingo against the cultivated notions of speaking 'good English', roaming around in the primitivism of ungroomed and uncut hair and nails, wearing unwashed t-shirts and shorts to classes (as opposed to the practice of going to school with neatly cleaned and pressed clothes), participating in extra-curricular activities like Shaastra, Saarang, LM (light music), etc. becomes the norm with the new attitude and outlook gained from this place, unlike the school days of the past, where textbooks, assignments, exams, tuition and coaching classes where the defining aspects of life. They would soon begin to learn the essential and elemental things about living in the institute and slowly acclimatize

themselves with the tradition and culture of the place.

Insti is a place for *infi* (lot of) fun. But at times, it can be painful too, particularly when it comes to acads (academics). *Acads* and the *atte* (attitudes) towards it categorizes students into many groups. The system of grading followed in IITM to evaluate students is popularly known as RG (relative grading). It is often considered unfair as it instigates unhealthy competition among students producing *Rgers* and *Rgmax fellows*. They try to get ahead of other *junta* (students) through practices which could be considered indecorous. On one hand, there are *Maggus* or the mugpots, the bookworms of the institute who bury themselves under the books and crashes (sleep) at the study table, while, on the other hand there are *chillmax* and *peacemax* junta who *put peace* (relax) throughout the *sem* (semester). The inherently intelligent lot who are adept at grasping and applying concepts, great at multitasking with minimal effort and handling various positions of responsibilities like *cordship*[4] and *coreship*[5] with ease, turn out to be the *stud* and *studmax* guys of the insti. Classes, lectures, tutorials, labwork, practicals, term papers, seminars, presentations, quizzes, *midsem*[6], *endsem*[7], viva, mini projects and projects are the 'necessary evils' on the path to an academic degree. Professors turn out to be the yardstick that determines how peaceful or painful a course is. Some professors and their courses are *peace (easy)/ peacemax (very easy)*.[8] In contrast, there are the *painmax* professors who *rape* (torment) students with the toughest possible questions in the presentations and exams thus making it a *rape session*. Then, there are *studmax* (brilliant) professors whose classes are sexy[9] (good) and *cupmax* (lousy) professors with the most boring and uninteresting classes. Exams, seminars, presentations and vivas are the nightmares for many if not for all. Whether students work throughout the sem or not, all the students *put infi fight* in *mugging* the subject the night before the exam. Almost everyone puts a *nightout*. Either the exam rapes the student or the student *rapes* the exam, based on which exams turn out to be *cupmax*, *rapemax* or *peacemax*. After the exam, students put an *epic*[10] *crash* (long and heavy sleep)

The life in the campus extends beyond academics and studies and much of the learning takes place outside the department. The day usually begins in the mess with the mess *grub* (food) which is a source of constant *cribs* (complaints) for many. Many students, as a result, opt to eat in the other eateries in campus, namely *guru (*Gurunath

student facilities centre*), irctc (*IRCTC caterers*), cc* (Campus café), *ramus* (Ramu tea stall) and *zaitoon,* which are not covered under the hostel management. Sometimes, they venture out of the campus for both *grub* and fun. *Mahabs* (Mahabalipuram) and *pondy* (Pondicherry) are the two places that students would definitely visit at some point during life in the campus. Students spend their leisure hours playing a variety of sports like *tt* (table tennis), *baddy* (badminton), *baski* (basketball), *footer* (football) and cricket, at *SAC* (student activity centre), insti stadium and hostel *quadys* (quadrilaterals).

Fellow students and seniors are major influences in the life of every student. They spend most of their time together in the campus. However, even while living as a close-knit community, there are demarcations among the students. Most prominent demarcations of student identities are at regional and hostel levels. Since IIT Madras is located in Chennai, students who are based in Chennai are called '*Chennaites'* or 'localites'. Those from Tamil Nadu are called 'T*ams'* (short for Tamilians) and 'M*allus'* (from the word Malayali) are the *peeps* (people/students) from Kerala. Students from the erstwhile united Andhra Pradesh are called 'Gultes', derived from the reverse spelling and pronunciation of the word 'Telugu' (their language), while 'D*igs/Digas'* is the term used for students from Karnataka (short for Kannadiga—the one who speaks Kannada). Students from northern India are called *Northies* and foreigners are called *Firangs.* The tams, digs, guilts, mallus, northies, firangs, etc. live together in 21 different hostels, of which seventeen are men's and four are women's, named after various Indian rivers such as Narmada, Godavari, Sharavati, Sarayu and Jamuna, among others. The student residents of their hostel are also identified by their hostel names. In the process they become *Narmadites, Sharavites, Godavites, Jamunites,* etc. Hostel identities become more pronounced during sports, *lit soc*[11] (literary, cultural and social) and other extra-curricular activities. This often creates stereotypes about the residents of a particular hostel. Till a few years ago, there was a strict division between undergraduate and postgraduate students in hostel allocations. There was a common stereotype that the PG students rarely mixed with the mainstream UG btech/dual degree students. Hence the *Cauverians* and *Krishnites* were often labelled as *enthuless junta.* However, the trend has changed over the years. The UG/PG demarcation has faded drastically since every hostel now accommodates both UG and PG students.

Even with all the demarcations, what is common among the students of IITM that is exclusive to its student community is the *instilingo*. Even the brightest and smartest of the students, in their early days in the campus, face difficulties in comprehending and using *instilingo*. The highly multifunctional nature of words also adds to a freshie's difficulty. But sooner or later, *instilingo* becomes a part of their lives too and soon becomes a matter of their unconscious pride.

Analysing–The Lexical Savour of Instilingo

All the nouns related to institute goes through a process of shortening in instilingo. It starts with the word 'institute' becoming *insti* which can be used as a replacement for the proper noun (*insti* never sleeps) or a geographical location (I am outside *insti*). Similarly, the names of the hostels are reduced to mono- or disyllabic terms—*Alak* (alaknanda), *jam* (jamuna), etc.[12] Academic departments too are put through the process, cutting them down to monosyllables—*app mech* (applied mechanics), *chem* (chemical engineering), etc. Similarly, places of recreation such as *oat* (open air theatre), *sac* (students activity centre), *gc* (gajendra circle and recreational activities like *baski* (basketball), *baddy* (badminton), etc are also shortened. All titles and administrative positions are shortened to the smallest possible label- *diro* (director), *profs* (professors), *gensec* (general secretary), etc. On the basis of their ethnic and regional differences, students are categorized as *mallus* (Malayali), *tams* (Tamilian), *freshie*, etc.[13] Thus, any noun, which is perceived to be longer than necessary, is cut down to its 'simplest' form. This process leads to the creation and usage of nouns in capacities where they wouldn't normally be used. Such multi-functional grammatical devices are not limited to nouns, but also extend to verbs, qualifiers and suffixes, thereby creating great differences between 'Insti Lingo' and 'English.'

Instilingo, like any other language, borrows words generously from other languages**.** There are two kinds of borrowing in instilingo. A number of words have been imported from various Indian languages like Hindi-*firangs* (foreigners) *hazaar* (thousand); Tamil- *chumma* (simply), *gumbal* (crowd); Malayalam—*koora, shashi*, and Telugu[14]—*enti/entra (*what)[15]. Words have also been borrowed from international slang, like '*bog*', '*crash*'among many.[16]

Quantifiers and qualifiers in common English such as 'many', 'very', 'a

lot' are replaced by 'n' and 'infy', two terms used with both the most countable (biscuit, coupon,) and uncountable nouns (water, cash) to describe unspecified abundance. Both 'n' and 'infinite' can be derived into other forms of quantification/qualification—'for the nth time', 'that is infinitely painful'. These qualifiers can also be used on comparative adverbs or in place of them; '*That prof is n better'*, '*That prof is infinitely more painful'.*

Morphological Flourishes

The use of suffixes in instilingo is particularly interesting due to the inventive word-formations that emerge as a result of innovative combination of the roots borrowed from various languages. The suffix '*aa*', an import from the Tamil language that uses the same root is used with most of the adverbs of manner. For example, *quickaa* (quickly) *randomaa* (randomly), etc. Conversely, the pruned English morpheme *fy* is used with Tamil words thus producing anglicized Tamil words like *poondufy* (navigate), *peetify* (boast), etc. Nouns and adjectives are added with the suffix 'level', a marker of comparison and used as an adjective. For example, '*He is a god-level drummer'*; 'god-level' is an adjective of 'drummer', implying that the drummer was exceptionally good. Suffixes are also used to convey negatives, examples being 'cup-level', 'pack-level' and 'rape-level' (my interview was cup-level da). It can be added to any proper/common noun to make an adjective of comparison; ('*He has industry-level fundaes'*). The suffixes '*ite*' and '*ian*' are added to specific geographical landmarks to indicate the inhabitants of that location, like modifying hostel names to forge a collective identity for the students of that hostel (*Sinduite, Saravite, etc*). There is a great deal of creative freedom for the speaker to generate new adjectives and adverbs based on these basic rules.

Syntactic and Semantic Alterations

The unique nature of instilingo has manifested itself the most in the way the word 'put' has been used. The most frequently used term by the student community of IITM, 'put' turns out to be the most permissible verb that stands as a substitute for many verbs like award, behave, come, drink, eat, feed, flirt, get placed, go, give, lend, publish, return, send, sleep, try, wash, write and any other action performed with regularity by this community. Certain examples are

Macha *put* peace in life da	Dude.. *Relax*
Put fight machi	*Work* hard for this dude
Mama ..She *puts* vetti scene da (vetti)	She is *showing off*
Dei.. don't *put* mokai jokes da	Don't *utter* poor jokes
Juntha..we have to *put* enthu	People.. We should *show* enthusiasm.
He *put* DB	He got *placed* at DB

Thus, it can be said that the word 'put' has undergone semantic expansion from its meaning as throw/move/bring in 'normal' English to a wide range of meanings in instilingo, so much so that many of its current usages seem miles away from what the word was originally intended to convey.

The word '*rape*' in instilingo has gone through a semantic shift known as meiosis, resulting in multiple meanings which are mostly context based. Contrary to the conventional meaning as 'to sexually exploit someone against their will', 'rape' in instilingo means 'difficult', 'torment', 'ace' as in 'the professor *raped* me at the presentation' (The professor tormented me asking questions), It was a *rape* session' (It was a difficult session) and 'I *raped* the quiz' (I aced the quiz).

Numerous expressions used in common English have undergone a process of common word formation, particularly zero derivations, resulting in new forms. An example for a zero derivation in instilingo is the word '*cup*'. The lowest fail grade in the grading system followed in IIT is a 'U' grade. Among the students, 'U' grade is popularly known as a cup as the symbol 'U' resembles one. From the symbol/alphabet 'U' originates the word cup. However, the word undergoes zero deviation and is used as different parts of speech such as a noun, verb and adjective. Consider the following sentences

(1a) I will get a *cup* in this quiz—I will get a 'U' grade in this quiz

(1b) I will *cup* in the exam—I will fail in this exam

(1c) It is a *cupmax* exam—It was a terrible exam and I see the possibility of me failing.

In (1a), cup is used as noun, 1(b) as a verb and 1(c) as an adjective.

The Craft of Sentence Constructions

Though it might seem to an outsider that instilingo hardly follows any rules or patterns of sentence constructions, the reality is that the lingo is as rule governed as any other language**.** Consider the following conversation:

> *A: Dude, which course?*
>
> *B: Lit crit da*
>
> *A: Peace no?*
>
> *B: What peace, macha? HS junta putting n pseud in class. Prof is also a painmax fellow.*

While the question 'are you putting Harvard?' is completely acceptable as per the institute standards, the semantic and functional equivalent of the same as 'are you applying Harvard' is not accepted and is seen as ungrammatical. The construction of sentences is governed by the Principle of Least Effort, which conveys the basic information and the bare necessities of effective communication, thus infiltrating unnecessary lexical items. At the same time, it is also interesting to note that utterances produced in conventional English which the students use follow the conventional rules of sentence constructions. Grammatical errors can be judged as 'bad language'. However, when '*insti jargons'* penetrate into a conversation, conventional rules of sentence constructions and language use holds no significance. In other words, the deliberate errors made are accepted without any attitudinal judgements about language because most of the sentence constructions in *instilingo* flouts the conventional rules and builds itself on the so-called 'errors'.

Conclusion

The above description gives an insight into commonly shared code (dialect) among resident students of IITMadras. This description argues for instilingo as a variety of English or for that matter a language in its own right. A specific feature of language is that it becomes a marker of identity of its speakers. Instilingo meets its requirement as residents in a subconscious fashion allows themselves to develop instilingo as a marker of their (IITM) identity. It creates a microcosm of society and speech community. Instilingo, a language spoken and understood by the students of IITMadras is a specific variety of English used by roughly

15,000 students at any given point in time with many of its members (i.e. the members of this speech community) all over the world. In its use by over 15,000 students, the concept of idiolect gets magnified at the institute. Hence, we call instilingo, the dialect (language) of IITMadras.

Notes

1. Later rephrased as 'freshie interaction sessions' when ragging rules were strictly enforced.
2. The format and the rules are briefly introduced to him if he is unaware of it.
3. Another interesting aspect of nickname is that most of the *fundaes (plural of funda which is explanations)* are *pondy types* (vulgar in nature). And that could be one of the reasons why girls are generally not known by their nick names as they hesitate to reveal them. Another reason is that the interactive sessions of *freshie* girls are not as rigorous as for *freshie* boys. insti names are mostly monosyllabic/disyllabic words.
4. The position of a coordinator in any event equivalent to lower level management.
5. The position of an event core equivalent to higher level management.
6. Mid semester examination.
7. End semester examination.
8. The superlative degree of peace.
9. Anything good will be called sexy.
10. Used as an adjective to convey the gravity of the action.
11. Co-curricular activities, festivals and other competitions.
12. The hostels whose names have not been shortened (Brahmaputra, Cauvery , Mahanadi) are occupied mainly by postgraduate students and doctoral candidates, who are not always a part of the mainstream student culture. The newly constructed hostel also lack shortened names (Sabarmathy, Tunga and Bhadra).
13. The terms, macha, machi, dude and uncle are common terms used to refer to any person of any relation; uncle is the only one of them that is used only for males; the others are used for both sexes.
14. It is interesting to note that only a few words have been borrowed from Telugu despite the fact that 60 per cent of the institute population are Telugu speakers.
15. Informal terms used to address friends and fellow students.
16. Mass media including movies, books and songs can be stated as the reason for this phenomenon

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