

Indian English? Reframing The Issue

Reviewed by Anju Sehgal Gupta



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Most of us have unquestioningly accepted the concept of “Indian English” promoted by Braj Kachru (1983, 1986), even though there have been a few murmurs against it (Dasgupta, 1993; Agnihotri & Singh, 2012). Now, for the first time Vijaya Kohli, in her highly interesting and erudite book entitled *Indian English? Reframing the Issue*, critically examines Kachru’s theory and presents an alternative paradigm to the interpretation of English in India. In fact Kohli’s book has three specific aims:

1. Demonstrate that the prevailing account of Indian English which has been popularized by Braj Kachru provides an unsatisfactory description and explanation for the sociolinguistic description of English in India.
2. Provide an alternative descriptive and analytical framework which explains the variability of English in India.
3. Test this framework.

Kohli makes it clear that she has no quarrel with the term “Indian English” in everyday parlance, but she questions the sociolinguistic concept that it embodies. Instead, she prefers the term “English in India”.

Her study begins with a perusal of the school books prescribed by various School Boards of Education and NCERT. She found that even in educational books for schools, which should reflect the most standardized version of English language, the books showed disparate individual/learner varieties. Further, research on both spoken and written English revealed that there is no “homogenous” or stable

variety that can be regarded as Indian English. Moreover, the linguistic features attributed to Indian English by Kachru and his followers cannot be considered a variety which is associated with any identifiable Indian group of users.

Chapter 1 outlines the starting point, and aims and objectives of the study. In Chapter 2, Kohli meticulously details the linguistic diversity in India, paying special attention to i) the sociolinguistic composition of India, ii) the advent and maintenance of English in India, and iii) early usage of the term “Indian English” before Kachru gave it the meaning it carries today.

In chapter 3, she further elucidates on the development of the concept of Indian English as a linguistic construct, from pre-Independence India leading up to the present. Kohli explains that the term Indian English was first used by the British to describe the English spoken by Indians. She then critically discusses in detail the appropriation of this term by Kachru and his followers, and how it achieved a “paradigm” status. She adds that this misled researchers since it did not represent at all the heterogeneity that is at the heart of the sociolinguistic reality of the Indian sub-continent. While she readily acknowledges and acclaims Kachru’s political motivation to rid post-colonial Englishes from being viewed from the native speakers’ perspective, she finds his arguments trivial and untenable. In fact, she devotes a large section of chapter 3 to debunking his arguments.

In the next chapter (Chapter 4), Kohli attempts to present an alternative model for the representation of English in India, one in which sociolinguistic heterogeneity plays a central and not peripheral role in explaining the emergent as well as different forms of English. She calls her model “Differentiating Sets, States and Processes Framework, or the Diversity-Centred Model”. In designing this model, she looks at four different domains of variations which are typically part of sociolinguistic research, and then adds a fifth variation. These are: i) Personal Variation, ii) Geographical Variation, iii) Social Variation, iv) Temporal Variation and v) Variation in Range of Domain of Use.

Describing her model in her own words:

The Differentiated Sets, States and Processes Model is conceived as a linguistic framework that will allow for such expansion and collapse of information. The zoom-in and zoom-out, aspect of representativeness implies that detailed sets, states and processes can be seen both as unitary entities or as entities that are parts of the larger whole. This scalability is possible in the DSSP model as sets inevitably include mini-sets and processes consist of micro-processes. (Kohli, 2017, p. 24)

Hence she constructs an abstract structure of the model and claims that while

it is a macro- sociolinguistic construct, it can be adapted to describe micro-sociolinguistic findings, which she attempts to do in chapters five and six. In these chapters, Kohli zooms into two sets of English speakers—learners of English from all settings, and users of English in urban settings. She describes the states and processes that take place within and between these two sets in order to show how her model can explain the emergence of urban interlanguage-based koines. In chapter six, she uses examples from grammar to argue that “Indian English” is in reality a random abstraction of some features of such urban interlanguage-based koines.

All in all, while Vijaya Kohli succeeds in debunking the fallacies of Kachru’s version of Indian English, her own attempts at formulating a new theory, although very brave, is not without weaknesses as she is herself quick to point out. Subsequent researchers can defend or reject the practicability of her theoretical construct; for me, the book takes my breath away with its sheer erudition and audacity. Do read it!

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