



English Bilingual

I should have known when I filled out the application for the Indian visa. I had to read the instructions five times before beginning the application. There were definitive articles missing that seemed essential. What was an airway bill no. and where would I find mine? The first checklist had to be signed and dated indicating that all of the requested items were enclosed in the given order. The second checklist had to be signed and dated indicating that the first checklist had been signed and dated. You can imagine how I jumped for joy when I found out that my visa was approved and FedEx had taken it out of the hands of this agency (which the Indian consulate contracts with for visa processing) and was on its way back to me from San Francisco.

Then I came to India and it was beautiful. On my ride from the airport, I found the road signs charming. After recovering from jet lag, I started working on a nine-page Indian form and nearly cried when I recognized the similarities to the visa application.

It turns out that my main work is reading, deciphering and filling out official forms and writing supporting documents for St. Ignatius School. Sr. Nektaria was waiting for a native English speaker to do this work. I was eager to meet her expectations, but immediately found myself tripping over the speed bumps of new vocabulary and expressions.

The English language arrived in India with the British who came to Calcutta in the early 1600s for trade. The East India Company was established and the British rule of India expanded from this northeastern corner. In the beginning, only Christian missionaries taught English to the Indians; usage was not forced by The Raj. By 1700, however, it became the official language of administration and Indians were demanding English instruction in order to participate and advance socially.

When the Indians established independence in 1947, the British didn't stick around, but their language and custom

of eating tea and biscuits did. At first the Indians were planning to phase English out of their new nation state. Due to violent protests against the proposed substitute, Hindi, they continued to use English temporarily, biding time until a solution was reached. Eventually, India chose Hindi as the official language and English as the associate language, with eighteen additional officially recognized national languages! English serves as a mode of communication for many Indians who speak two or three regional languages but share no common indigenous language.

Over the course of years of colonization, and the subsequent adoption of English as their own, the Indians have put their own twist on things. In urban centers, especially where Hindi is spoken, it's called "Hinglish" — a mix of Hindi and English. Since I'm in West Bengal, where Bengali is the mother tongue of most people, I started calling it Bilingual.

**English Words
I've Discovered in India:**
allopathic, emolument, exigency

**Creative Bilingual Words
Not to Be Found in the Dictionary:**
pecuniarily, encashable

Indian job titles used without translation:
dharwan (guard), *mistry* (lead contractor),
amin (surveyor)

English Words of Indian Origin:
jungle, bungalow, pajamas, avatar,
shampoo, dinghy, cheetah,
khaki, typhoon

My best qualifications for doing this specific job are the hours I've logged watching BBC television and having an active imagination. The expressions I've found aren't that funny, they're just cumbersome. Here are some examples:

- "Leave cannot be adjusted against termination of notice period in connection with the cessation of service."
- "In the larger interest of the student..." and "In pursuance of the general interest of the school..."
- "Are days lesson traction for days as prescribed taking place in the institution?"

The part that I do find funny is that, for the most part, the Indians seem to understand these phrases. For that reason I hold back from editing and instead am learning to write in this style!

In India, all official forms are in English—so you have to at least know someone who knows someone who speaks

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English, to get by. It seems that anyone who has received an education, has studied English somewhere along the way though. Even so, I've noticed that English seems to be relegated to government documents, applications, signage, product labels, receipts, textbooks, and college papers. It's not the language that the girls speak to each other over lunch. It's not the language that they watch movies in, nor the language that comes most naturally when they're angry, sad or surprised. Although some of them enjoy reading novels in both English in Bengali, I get the feeling that it isn't fun for most of them—it's an obligation to study, but not for real life. Thankfully for the Orthodox here, most of the prayers and hymns have already been translated into Bengali, so regardless of their age or English language ability, in church they can pray and sing in the language closest to their hearts.

Sister showed me a cover letter signed "Yours etc." followed by the signature of the applicant. She said this is a common closing here and asked me about it. She thought it was odd, so she signs more specifically, "Yours Faithfully" or "Yours Sincerely." I hadn't seen it before, so I suggested it might be British. I told her that it struck me as awfully personal to sign a cover letter for a job application, "Yours" anything. I suppose if you really wanted the job, I could see writing, "Hoping to be Yours!"

This whole situation reminds me of topics from my college linguistics classes. We learned about pidgins and creoles and



↑ This patriotic declaration is found cheerfully painted on the side of most trucks.

Previous page: The Birla Planetarium offers six daily shows, two each in Hindi, English and Bengali. I accompanied the school children to a Hindi show. See Bengali and Hindi text on the building (left and right of center respectively).

other unique situations that gave birth to new varieties of language. In another class, we tried to define what a native English speaker was and after much discussion, we came to this: A native English speaker is someone who considers himself or herself a native English speaker. At the time I was unsatisfied with this philosophical non-answer, even though I understood why all the other definitions we tried fell short. After a month in India, however, I wonder if this is the only fair way to approach it. Out of the 35 million English speakers in India, for some it is their first language and for others a second or third language. Some speakers reveal the speech patterns and grammar of a regional language in their English usage (one common example is that if their native tongue does not have gender-specific pronouns, they may use "he" or "she" interchangeably in English). Other Indians speak English comfortably with the pace and idioms common in the U.K. or the U.S. And regardless of how they speak it, they are the second largest population of English speakers in the world.

In Linguistics, we also talked about two approaches to studying language; as a prescriptive or descriptive grammarian. The prescriptive approach is to say how the language should be used, while the descriptive approach is to describe how it is used. For better or worse, I've seen many new words and expressions slip into American English over the past several years. This convinces me that you have to couple a sense of origin with an openness to evolution as you encounter new language; then wait and see what stands the test of time. Likewise, the more English I read here, the more I find my editorial instinct giving way to a spectator's awe at their creativity. Maybe you will find that my own English writing "develops" the longer I'm here.

During the first couple of weeks, I was so surprised by the confounding ways in which I found English used that I thought, why don't they just forget it and use Hindi or Bengali? Ultimately, however, I see that it has worked in India's favor to have this longstanding relationship with English. Although some nationalists insist on ridding the country of English, other recognize it as an important language for commerce, the technology industry, tourism, diplomacy and of course, the ubiquitous call center. Between all the varieties of English speakers and non-English speakers, I think you'll find a creative linguistic environment of English Bilingual alive and well in West Bengal. It may be a little rocky at the start, but soon enough you'll be navigating it like a pro. ✖

Vocabulary Lessons

Fans of *The Chronicles of Narnia* will probably quickly recognize the British words "dustbin," "torch" and "biscuit." Here are some words or usages that were new to me:

hero = a male movie star. I was telling one of the girls that I liked Shahid Kapoor and she replied that he was a flop hero. That didn't sound so good, but she only giggled in explanation. Later I learned that a flop hero is an actor whose recent movies haven't done well. According to one of the girls, Shahid's next movie, *R...Rajkumar*, looks like it could bring him back up to hero status.

tiffin = a snack or light lunch. The kids take tiffin boxes to school and have tiffin after they wake up from their afternoon naps.

SMS = text message (used as a noun and verb, i.e. "I will SMS him the address.")

Don't break the line! = Stay in (a nice, straight) line!

The staff must recover their time. = The staff need to work additional days, to make up for the days that they take personal time.

Isn't it? = Right? Don't you agree?

"Double" or "Triple" - When reading a number that has two or three of the same number (i.e. 3) in succession, they will say "double 3" or "triple 3." When I hear this, I think of Tigger, from the Winnie the Pooh stories, who spells his name "T-I-double 'g'-errr!"