



Tracing Linguistic Evolution: Language Contact between English, Bengali, and Other Languages Across Three Phases in Bangladesh and its Place in World Englishes

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Abstract

The article examines the historical development of language contact in Bangladesh. It focuses on how Bengali, English, and other regional languages interact. The article is bifurcated into three stages namely, the colonial period (1853-1947), the post-colonial period (1947-1971), and the post-liberation age following Bangladesh's independence (1971 onwards). Significant cultural and socio-political shifts were brought about by each period. The study demonstrates how these stages contributed to the development of a regional form of English. The development of this variation coincided with the dominance of Bengali in a bilingual and multilingual setting. The article makes use of the World Englishes framework to comprehend these changes. It draws attention to Bangladeshi English's distinctive linguistic developments. The historical and sociolinguistic background of the nation is reflected in these characteristics. The study also demonstrates how English has maintained its global significance while adapting to local demands. Moreover, the article captures the development of English in Bangladesh by combining historical periods with the idea of World Englishes. Finally, it highlights how several eras have influenced a unique language landscape.

Introduction

An unusual instance of linguistic contact can be seen in Bangladesh where English, Bengali, and other languages have historically interacted. Interaction between speakers of different languages causes this phenomenon. It frequently leads to innovations and alterations in language. The impact of one language on another is shown in these modifications. The linguistic landscape of Bangladesh has been greatly influenced by language contact. From being the language of British leaders, English has developed into a global communication, administration, and educational tool. The three main stages of linguistic contact in Bangladesh are examined in this article:

1. The Pre-Independence Colonial Period (1853-1947): English was used for both government and education.
2. The Post-Colonial Period under Pakistan (1947-1971): English, Bengali and Urdu power dynamics were significant.
3. The Post-Liberation Period (1971 onwards): English was modified to meet the demands of an independent Bangladesh.

Each stage marks substantial changes in the functions and connections across languages. Localized varieties of English emerged as a result of these changes in language use. The study places these modifications in the context of World Englishes. It investigates the role that language interaction plays in the development of Bangladeshi English. The historical, cultural, and social settings of Bangladesh are reflected in this diversity.

This work contributes to the wider discussion on World Englishes. It emphasizes how Bengali and other regional languages have influenced the localization of English. Moreover, the study stresses the significance of comprehending linguistic development in particular sociopolitical settings. Both national identity and international communication are significantly shaped by language in post-colonial contexts like Bangladesh.

Language Contact

Language contact happens when more than one language and/or dialects come into contact with each other. As Thomason (2000) maintained, there is no such language whose speakers have not come into contact with another

language. The world has witnessed language contact, language change, and lexical borrowings. The national language of Bangladesh, Bengali, has been one of those languages that have experienced all these behaviors of language contact. Gradually, it is seen that English has occupied many areas of communication along with the native language in Bangladesh as in Africa and Asia in the post-colonialism period (Thomason, 2000). Also, in Bangladesh, the function of English has shifted from the medium of instruction at the secondary and higher levels of education to a connecting language or *lingua franca*.

Language contact that was initiated with lexical borrowings was extended to *code-mixing*, that is, the mixing of two or more languages, and *code-switching*, that is, substituting between two or more languages (Moquit, 2011). Consequently, contact was established between English and Bengali. However, it was gradually marked by the convergence of English and Bengali in one of the areas - either code-mixing or code-switching.

Language Contact Between English, Bengali, and Other Languages

Following this, the language contact and its consequences in Bangladesh have been divided into the following three phases: the first phase of contact during the pre-independence period or the colonial period (1853 to 1947), the second phase of contact during the post-colonial period of Pakistan (1947-1971), and the third phase of contact during the post-liberation period of Bangladesh (1971 onwards) ((Banu & Sussex, 2001).

The First Phase of Contact (1853 to 1947)

The first phase began in 1853 and was recognized as the “Imperial transplant of English” (Aktar, 2011). The ending of this phase was marked by the independence of West and East Pakistan from British rule. Later, in 1971, East Pakistan became newly formed Bangladesh while West Pakistan became newly formed Pakistan. By the time the British had been there in the sub-continent for about 200 years, it was identified that some of the words of Hindi and Urdu language were mutually borrowed into English. For instance, ‘*jungle*’ is an English word borrowed from Sanskrit. More such Hindi and Urdu words were borrowed into English like ‘*chutney*’ (Thomason, 2000). This process of borrowing was two-sided. The process of mutual borrowing of the vocabulary was the first consequence of language contact (Fathema, 2015). Besides, the victory of Macaulay (known as the Father of Indian Education) to impart English education in India during the dispute of introducing a language to be used as a medium of education was significant (Cutts, 1953). At the beginning of the first phase of contact, English was spoken by the British rulers, and later, English words that were borrowed from Urdu and Hindi were used by people of the local community. After such lexical borrowings, the other two concepts code-switching and code-mixing started taking shape.

As discussed above, code-switching is a phenomenon that involves a speaker alternatively using two or more languages or language varieties while conversing at the same time. This concept was then majorly used by the bilingual people of the community (Chatterjee, 2015). As mentioned by Rahman (2007), the British government introduced a combination of English, Urdu, and Hindi in their education system in India, with English at the higher level and Urdu and Hindi at the primary and secondary levels. Also, there was limited social interaction between the linguistically oriented individuals and the local communities, who incorporated borrowed English vocabulary into their spoken Urdu and Hindi. It was seen that the major interaction took place either among the rulers or the people working under the rulers. More use of the English language was noticed in the written mode. The concepts of code-switching and code-mixing were well-adopted by some people named linguists, whereas the local community was involved in bilingualism as its people were speaking both Hindi and Bengali. The linguistic concept was adopted by the linguists whereas the concept of bilingualism was adopted by the broader community which extended the process of borrowing the English words into the local language. The transition in language adoption, shifting from smaller entities to larger ones, emerged as the second outcome of language contact (Fathema, 2015). There was a difference in contact between English with local languages and the contact of local languages with Arabic and others. A 2020 analysis by Chowdhury and Al Amin sheds light on the increasing use of code-switching between English and Bengali in informal and professional settings, reflecting broader societal shifts in bilingual competence. India was not divided only by means of language but also by the medium of education. That is, the British rulers spoke English while the local people spoke Urdu and Hindi. Consequently, the British introduced a two-level system of education – English as the medium of education, on the one hand, and Hindi and Urdu as the medium of education, on the other. In this situation where the society was divided into two parts – higher and lower class due to the mediums of education - English was observed to be the language of the higher class, having a close affinity with the British rulers. Also, the establishment of universities that utilized English as the medium of instruction predominantly occurred in urban areas, catering primarily to the urban population. Thomas Macaulay was the one who organized the system of education in India at the time of the British Raj aiming to strengthen the prominence of English language (Cutts, 1953). Also, in the later years of *Macaulay’s Minutes*, Persian was replaced by English, Urdu, and Hindi as per the decision of the court. In the court of law, English was recommended at the higher level, and Urdu and Hindi were included in the lower levels of education. Contrary to British Rule, the Bengal Presidency Report (1844) aimed to encourage the use

of Indian languages and culture in India. English was a declarative symbol of colonial power during British rule. English replaced Hindi and Urdu in all the official areas including education and administration during the colonial era in India (Farooqui, 2014). It gradually became the medium of education, commerce and colonial administration (Malak, 2013).

The Second Phase of Contact (1947-1971)

The second phase of language contact began in the year 1947 and ended with the independence of Bangladesh (East Pakistan) from Pakistan in 1971. The year 1947 is marked by the separation of India and Pakistan from the common Indian subcontinent. It was seen that during the partition, Pakistan had declared English a mandatory subject at school. During the partition, it also served as a link between West Pakistan and East Pakistan (Dil, 2012). In Pakistan, General Ayub Khan was a ruler for eleven years and encouraged the use of English. General Ayub Khan's presence was marked by some reforms and measures that aimed at promoting English as a language for the army officers and the elite class of Pakistan. This particular period was declared as the year of elitist education of English in Pakistan (Rahman, 2007).

During the partition period, it became apparent that English was predominantly employed in the local regions of Pakistan. Though there was no massive change in the form of English in Pakistan, the number of schools, colleges and universities in smaller towns increased with the aim of encouraging education. Over time, there was a progressive rise in the presence of linguists within smaller rural communities. Earlier, it was seen that English was only used in the official domains, but in the later years, it began to be used by the local people of Pakistan with Urdu (Aktar, 2011). The divergence between the rural and urban areas of Pakistan had been much before Pakistan became independent. Since then, it has been expanding. As a consequence of this expansion, English proficiency has permeated both urban centres and smaller local towns and villages.

Thus, the medium of education has established a differentiation between the urban areas where English is used as a medium of education by the private sector for the elite class and Urdu as a medium of exchange by the government authorities (Rahman, 2007). It was seen that only the elite class of society was allowed to study at private schools where English was taught as a mandatory subject. These classes had business connections worldwide. Since English has served as a communication bridge between East and West Pakistan, and has continued to be an official language in Pakistan.

However, after much discussion of English as the official language of Pakistan, the then- Pakistan politicians failed to decide on their language policies (Rasheed, 2012). The constitution of Pakistan had a list of clear specifications regarding the position of the state language, the structure of English and guidelines on the replacement of English as a medium of education. It was mentioned in the constitution that Urdu and Bengali would remain as state languages till 1960. Though English continued to be the official language for administrative purposes, the guidelines on English as a foreign language subject in the educational system were laid down (Banu & Sussex, 2001).

India and Pakistan were going through the same phase. While Pakistan opted for Bengali and Urdu, India chose Hindi as their national language. East Pakistan which was then recognised as Bangladesh had attached high prestige to English which was even taught as a compulsory subject in secondary and higher secondary schools. In Bangladesh, English has been the medium of instruction at the university level. At the same time, English was widely used in the military, court, and government.

The Third Phase of Contact (1971 onwards)

The third phase commenced with the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. English has been an essential element of Bangladesh's national curriculums at all levels of education. This was because British colonials encouraged the use of English by keeping it a mandatory subject at higher secondary levels in the first half of the 19th century (Malak, 2013). Following a period of liberalisation, the government of Bangladesh implemented significant reforms in the system of the English language teaching and learning context. Several governing bodies such as the Bangladesh Education Commission were established to oversee the educational system and facilitate cohesive political ties with the administrative framework. In 1947, the educational policies in Bangladesh followed the political base of the nation going through radical changes (Islam, 2013). Rahman (2009) has elaborated that language policy in post-colonial Bangladesh, especially during the Pakistan era, has influenced the dynamic between Bengali and English, creating a complex multilingual environment. Additionally, studies like that of Karim and Shahed (2020) discuss the challenges in English language teaching in Bangladesh, particularly the gap between policy intentions and classroom realities. These findings underscore the persistent influence of colonial language policies on modern education systems.

The government kept English as a means of communication at the secondary level and a medium of learning and teaching at the higher secondary level. The universities also followed the same pattern as that at the higher secondary level. The official domain had no change in their use of English as a medium of writing and communication.

After a certain period, the country embarked on a transition process with the objective of implementing Bengali as the primary medium of instruction at all levels of education (Moquit, 2011). However, it failed to do so

because it remained dependent upon English as a language for science and technology. This was a sure sign of English being important and indispensable at the higher as well as administrative levels. Almost all administrative government and private jobs demanded a good command of the English language. Despite Bengali being the official language, English remained to be important after Bangladesh gained its independence, especially in governance and education (Hossain & Tollefson, 2007). A recent study by Awasthi et al. (2021) highlights the interplay between English language policies and multilingual practices in South Asia, focusing on the sociopolitical factors influencing language education in Bangladesh and neighboring regions.

World Englishes Framework

Moreover, understanding how localised variants evolve in post-colonial nations and adapt to the cultural and linguistic environment is made clear when one considers the development of English in Bangladesh in the larger framework of World Englishes (Kachru, 1992; Crystal, 2003). Eventually, the development of English in Bangladesh has directed to a localized variation recognized as Bangladeshi English, which mirrors both the socio-cultural and political history of the area (Schneider, 2007). As English continues to be a global lingua franca, its role in Bangladesh is not just limited to communication but is also tied to identity and cultural interaction (Young, 2006). Research by Hossain and Akhter (2023) explores how Bangladeshi English incorporates cultural and linguistic elements from Bengali, enriching the global understanding of localized English varieties within the World Englishes paradigm. The integration of English into the digital and professional spaces in Bangladesh has been documented in a 2022 study by Rahman et al., which examines how economic globalization drives English usage alongside Bengali in urban centers. These above findings underscore the relevance of the World Englishes framework in understanding the nuanced interaction between global forces and localized linguistic practices.

Finally, Bangladesh had several language contact situations. The British era had been marked by the borrowing of many Hindi, Urdu and Arabic words in the Bengali language at the time when Bangladesh was part of the Indian sub-continent. Besides, the Muslim rule has provided Bangladesh with Islamic culture (Kashyap, 2014). Since Urdu was the national language for a long time along with Bengali, Urdu words influenced the Bengali language to a considerable extent. Similarly, Funk (2014) mentioned that Arabic made a large contribution to the development of the Bengali language as Persian and Turkish did. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Bengali language has had contact with many languages like Arabic, Urdu, and English.

Conclusion

The linguistic evolution of Bangladesh demonstrates the effects of linguistic interaction between Bengali, English, and other regional languages. It offers a transparent illustration of how regional English varieties evolve within the context of World Englishes. From colonial until post-liberation, the linguistic landscape of Bangladesh has been influenced by every stage of its history. English has been crucial to worldwide communication, governance and education during these periods. Furthermore, this study has demonstrated how these interaction times affected the use of English in Bangladesh. Additionally, they helped Bangladeshi English become a distinct variation. The nation's bilingual and multilingual environment is reflected in this variation of English. By incorporating regional linguistic traits and cultural nuances, it demonstrates how language may adapt to a post-colonial society. English is still widely used in Bangladesh today. While maintaining the country's sense of identity, it links it to the opportunities around the world. Future studies should look more closely at how this evolution has affected sociolinguistics. It is worthwhile to investigate subjects like the impact of global English and digital communication on Bangladeshi English. We can gain a deeper knowledge of World Englishes and language contact in post-colonial cultures by researching these exchanges.

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