

## AMBIGUITIES AND TENSIONS IN THE ROLE AND USE OF ENGLISH IN BANGLADESH

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### ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, there has been a revival of interest in the English language in Bangladesh with the government putting a lot of emphasis on the teaching and learning of English. There have been a plethora of initiatives at the macro-level to strengthen English language education in urban as well as rural areas in the country which are to a certain extent complemented by micro-level initiatives at the family level. Parents aspire for their children to master the English language and spend on private tuition according to their abilities to ensure that learners achieve good results in English and other subjects. Young people, on their part, are keen to learn and use English alongside Bangla, sometimes mixing them together in the same breath in ways that appear outrageous and ridiculous to a lot of people holding tenaciously onto rather conservative views about roles and use of language in national identity formation. Although there is a general consensus that Bangladeshis need English to move ahead in the context of globalization, how English should be used, where and to what extent are issues that are far from being resolved. English is viewed both as an essential lingua franca and a threat to the vitality of Bangla. English is also often blamed for the perceived corruption of Bangla in the media. This paper focuses on the ambiguities and tensions surrounding the roles and use of English vis-à-vis Bangla in Bangladesh.

**Key words:** Commodification, Englishization, Anglicization, Nativization.

### Introduction

Since the introduction of the English language in the subcontinent, it has enjoyed a bittersweet relationship with the native population. Back in the days of the Raj, there were people who realized the potential of the colonial language for opening avenues for the pursuit of knowledge and career advancement while there were others who, driven by a nationalistic zeal, opposed the promotion of the language. With overwhelming passion for the struggle for independence all around, English was often presented as the language of the enemy and the local people were supposed to identify with one of the local languages, not many, and certainly not with the foreign rulers' language. The naivety inherent in such jingoistic nationalism and the alternate possibility of simultaneously learning and using local languages as well as English was clearly stated by Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali poet and philosopher who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913 through translations of his work in English. The Nobel Laureate was unequivocal in his support for English, as we see in the following

excerpt from his convocation speech in 1937 at the University of Calcutta:

.... at Calcutta university we cannot now afford to deny English the status and curricular space that the language has so far enjoyed .... there is no doubt about the strength and richness that Bangla literature has derived from English. ... we now need English not only to access European knowledge and science but also to attain a certain broadness of vision and perspective. (Tagore 300)

Over the years since that speech by Tagore, English has only spread wider and deeper in the subcontinent. The language has acceptance now, having been adopted and also adapted by the local people in our part of the world, as in many other regions. In Bangladesh, in particular, English occupies pride of place in the curriculum, and substantial amount of national and private expenditure on English points to the emphasis put on the teaching and learning of English. And yet, there is still a sense of tension and ambiguity over

the role and use of English in the country which will be discussed in some detail in the paper.

### **The Promotion and Commodification of English**

Against the backdrop of globalization and the widespread discourses of the centrality of the English language to international development, Bangladesh, like many other parts of the world, has increasingly embraced English as evident in her language-in-education policies and everyday social interaction of the people. Aspirations for upward social mobility, the pursuit of knowledge and higher education, a desire to engage with the international community, and the widespread use of entertainment and communications technology have motivated Bangladeshis increasingly to make space for English in their lives alongside Bangla, the locally dominant language. Recent policy changes by the Ministry of Education have seen English being introduced as a compulsory subject from grade one apparently to allow greater masses to access English as well as Communicative Language Teaching being imposed as a top-down measure to facilitate the development of communication skills in English, perceived as vital for human resource development (Hamid, 2010). In addition to the millions of learners learning English at schools, there are thousands of those who are taking private English lessons in private language schools – locally known as coaching centres – with the aim of bringing their proficiency levels up to the standard required for the job market. Private language centres, on their part, have not only responded to this demand for English with a plethora of tailor-made English proficiency courses but have also contributed to the discourse of the importance of English. Both private and government agencies have thus matched each other in creating a greater demand for English, if not in catering for it. English is thus not only viewed, learned and used with a lot of optimism but also promoted, commodified, sold and taught aggressively with gung-ho optimism.

### **Loss of Curricular Space to English**

The role of English in higher education in Bangladesh has been further consolidated with the emergence of private universities in the last couple of decades which run academic programmes mostly in English with little or no provision for Bangla, the national language. At secondary and higher secondary levels too, many reputed and

traditionally Bangla-medium schools have started offering a parallel curriculum in the English medium for those who want it or can afford it. Moreover, Kinder Gartens are mushrooming not only in metropolitan areas but also in many suburbs of Bangladesh. The recently launched English-medium *madrashas* (Islamic religious schools) complete the picture of the ubiquitous and rapid spread of English in the education sector of Bangladesh. Although Bangla remains a dominant language in educational institutions, particularly at lower levels and in poorer neighbourhoods, English is clearly pushing Bangla for more and more curricular space at all levels. What is gain for English is thus a loss for Bangla, but making room for English is also necessary. So questions that arise are: How much curricular space should we give to English and at which level(s)? If more emphasis is put on English, will this lead to the gradual displacement of Bangla? These questions reflect ambiguities surrounding the role of English and its relationship with the local language(s).

### **Displacement of Bangla**

English being a colonial legacy in Bangladesh often comes to be seen with suspicion and the excess enthusiasm over English is a cause for concern for many, particularly those who regard Bangla, the local national language, as the symbol of Bengali national identity. Although Bangla is in robust health in Bangladesh with around 98% of the population speaking it as a mother tongue, there is a perception that English is gradually displacing Bangla in some domains. Eminent scholar and writer Syed Manzoorul Islam (2012) observes: “In the last twenty years English has taken over in some domains as the former (English) is preferred in meetings, lectures, seminars and conferences.” Professor Islam’s observation chimes with Robert Phillipson’s (1992) argument that English replaces and/or displaces other languages in many societies around the world. There is thus tension between embracing English on the one hand and maintaining the local language(s) on the other.

### **The Perceived Corruption of Bangla in the Media**

In electronic media there is a far greater proportion of English than what we would see even a decade ago with the new satellite TV channels now broadcasting news, talk shows and other programmes in English alongside Bangla. In print media too, there

is now a greater presence of English as evident in the publication of new English dailies, periodicals, magazines, and the emergence of news websites such as bdnews24.com, and the popularity of social networking sites such as the Facebook. This spread and increasing use of English in the media has been blamed for the perceived distortion of Bangla, the local language.

### Englishization of Bangla

Kachru (1994) talks about the dual processes of change that characterize contact situations involving English and local languages. The first is termed Englishization which refers to the influence of English on local languages and the other is the process of Nativization whereby English changes as it acquires a local character borrowing features from local languages. These processes often take place simultaneously as individuals begin to use both languages in their day-to-day lives and subconsciously draw on one while using the other. Englishization and Nativization happen not only in the domain of lexis but also at the levels of syntax, discourse and pragmatics. Englishization is frequently noticed as Bangladeshis mix English and Bangla in speech while Nativization of English is more evident in English writings of Bangladeshi authors. Englishization involving lexical borrowings from English often comes in for criticism in the media. Let us have a look at some examples of Englishization documented by Syed Manzoorul Islam (2012):

“friendsরা, এই offer কিন্তু valid till fourteenth। so মনে রেখো। like... it's a ফাটাফাটি event। so send করো...” (“friends, this offer is valid till fourteenth. Please keep that in mind. like... it's a fantastic event, so do send ...”)

“stock market crisis-এর reasonগুলো investigate করতে হবে। যেসব big actor ও player background-এ role play করছে, যাদের নাম ইব্রাহিম সাহেব তাঁর report-এ reveal করেছেন, তাদের proper punishment দিতে হবে” (“Reasons for the stock market crisis must be investigated. The big actors and players who are playing a role in the background, particularly those revealed in the investigation report of Mr. Ibrahim, must be given proper punishment”)

The above examples typify code-mixing behaviour by Bangladeshis where Bangla is generally the

matrix language while words come from both Bangla and English. Banu and Sussex (2001) claim that code-mixing between English and Bangla is spontaneous, unpredictable, and typical of the spoken language in Bangladesh. The interesting thing about the above extracts though is that English words outnumber their Bangla counterparts, unlike what we would normally see in everyday interactions, and therefore attract sharp criticism. Islam (2010), for example, opines: “If as many as three to four words are inserted into a Bangla sentence, words that have Bangla equivalents, I certainly can't endorse that.” He clearly sees no need to use English words where Bangla words are available.

### Anglicization of Bangla

A peculiar type of Englishization marked by what we might call “Anglicization of Bangla” has been reported and termed FM Banglish by Basu (2009). FM Banglish has been popularized by radio jockeys (RJ) on FM radio stations and is imitated by teenagers and the youth but this style has also drawn flak from members of the general public. According to Basu (2009), FM Banglish is characterised by a high degree of code-mixing between English and Bangla on the one hand and “anglicized” and affected pronunciation of Bangla words on the other.

Similar trends of code-mixing in everyday interactions are reported by Ahmed and Tinny (2012) and Shaila Sultana (2014). Ahmed and Tinny's (2012) questionnaire survey of tertiary-level students in the capital city of Bangladesh reveals that over half of young people speak like RJ's and that over 80 % of the participants believe that young people like them are being influenced by the FM style. Participants in Basu's study link FM style with global pop culture as well as English-heavy education of RJ's and upper-class youth (Basu, 2009). Sultana (2014), however, maintains that young adults in metropolitan areas use both English and Bangla “very creatively, strategically and pragmatically” and thus “bring in diversity to Bangla not only from English but also from different genre of discourses” (74).

### Promotion and Valorisation of Non-standard Bangla in TV plays

The emergence of FM Banglish, a product of Englishization, has coincided with another

controversial development, namely the use of regional dialects and vernacular forms in television soap operas. The apparent promotion and valorisation of non-standard Bangla in television dramas is also linked to the encroachment of English and the lack of respect for Bangla. Whether or not dialects should be allowed on TV is hotly discussed and debated in the print and electronic media. The following extract from a popular TV play titled *First Date* and directed by Mostofa Sarwar Farooki illustrates the extent to which non-standard Bangla is used these days:

A female friend of Pinto speaks on the phone with a 40 year old man. She says: “Amar to buirai posondo. Chengra polapan amar bhallage na, buirara onek matured hoy, ar experienced hoi, handsome-o hoi, amar to josh lage.” (I rather like the matured guys, not the callow young men. Slightly older blokes happen to be experienced, handsome even – exactly what I fancy in men.)

In this short extract, we notice the use of words such as “buirai”, “chengra”, “polapan”, “josh” which are only heard among teenagers and college-going adults in extremely informal settings in real life. Use of colloquial slang raises eyebrows of those who consider the television and the film as media for education, not just entertainment.

### **Macro-level Initiatives to Protect and Promote Bangla**

Of late, the government of Bangladesh has strengthened efforts to have Bangla declared an official language in the United Nations as a recognition of the vast number of its speakers and its heritage in literature and history (Bhaumik, 2009). This suggests a strong resolve to further consolidate the great tradition attached to the language which has seen many great works in literature, songs and music composed in the language over centuries. The language movement of 1952 has been an epoch-making event in the history of Bangladesh and the Bangla language. In recognition, the UNESCO declared the 21<sup>st</sup> February as the International Mother Language Day in 1999.

On February 16, 2012, the High Court in Bangladesh issued a ruling against the distortion of Bangla. The court outlawed the use of “Banglish” on television and radio stations and the move was

welcomed by many experts who clearly worry about a foreign invasion of the language. Mr. Shamsuzzaman Khan (2012), the head of the Bangla Academy, a state-run institution that publishes books and conducts research on the Bangla language, stated in an interview with AFP that the verdict was “long overdue” and that:

These FM radios and televisions were creating a strange language and almost destroyed the dynamics of our beautiful mother tongue.... It is a timely order. It will save our language from destruction. We have already seen how the Filipino language lost its glory due to the imposition of American English.

The High Court ruling highlights the level of apprehension many have of the future of Bangla in Bangladesh and the perceived damaging role English plays in the degeneration of Bangla. In this atmosphere of mistrust and apprehension, desire for proficiency in English, however, continues to be on the rise. Creative appropriation and nativization of English by Bangladeshi authors have also become common practice.

### **Appropriation and nativization of English**

There is a rich tradition in Bangladesh of translations of literary classics from other languages to Bangla. The Bangla Academy Book Fair, held in the month of February every year, is an occasion when hundreds of books in Bangla translations hit the stands. The Bangla language has benefitted greatly from this practice borrowing directly or in translations many expressions, ideas and discursive practices from English and other languages. Eminent academic Fakrul Alam (2012) notes:

Can we imagine Bengali literature to be what it is if it had not been fertilized by English in the early nineteenth century? Would there be Bankim Chandra Chatterjee without Sir Walter Scott and Michael Madhusudhon Dutta without Milton? Indeed, can one imagine Rabindranath’s poetry without the Romantic and pre-Raphaelite poets, his novels and stories without his reading of English and European fiction, short or long, and his paintings without western painterly expressionism? For that matter, would we have Bengali modernism without the European modernism that came to Bengal via the English language?

Appropriation of English for creative work is also to be noticed in Bangladesh as a handful of writers have taken to composing in English. The poetry of Kaiser Haq, the leading poet in the English language from the country, reflects gradual nativization of English as in the following lines from his collections titled *Published in the Streets of Dhaka*:

O her hair is like the dark sky  
Above sangsad bhaban  
& her hair is just  
Like aishwariya's. ('ms bunny sen')

Our culture is rich  
like television, cinema, dances and songs  
My love-life is cultural also  
with neighbouring daughter going to cinema  
and singing in the bathroom – but that is  
personal matter. ('Welcome Tourist Saheb')

What we notice in the two extracts above is that Haq borrows his images, themes from the Bangladeshi society while writing in English. In the first extract, he alludes to the poem titled "Banalata Sen" by Jibananda Das, a reputed Bengali poet of the previous era. As Fakrul Alam (2007) notes, "...although Kaiser Haq writes his poems in English, he is not totally detached from the poetry in Bengali that is being written in Bangladesh" (326). Nevertheless, Haq (2007) has to justify the use of English ahead of Bangla, the national language:

...poetry written in a language other than one's mother tongue is not likely to be conspicuous for its lyricism. ...But it does not follow...that subcontinental poetry in English is doomed to oblivion. The best of it is good by any standard, noteworthy for its irony and satire, the quality of its imagery, its use of the Indian voice. It gives us something one cannot find in any other kind of English poetry or in poetry in the subcontinent's regional language. Besides, with the subcontinental diaspora, and with the naturalization of English to the region, more and more Indians are, so to speak, picking up English in their mother's wombs. (229)

### Conclusion

What we notice in the discussion above is tension and ambiguity in the role and use of English in

Bangladesh. On the one hand, there is a consensus that people need to learn English to function in the globalized economy of the twenty-first century and large chunks of government as well as private funding is allocated to the teaching and learning of English. At the same time, there is apprehension that English might corrupt the Bangla language and therefore any perceived changes to the Bangla language is attributed to the influence of English. Promotion of vernacular forms of Bangla in television drama only adds to the sense of vulnerability and fear that many Bengalis have about the maintenance of the standard form of Bangla. In such an environment, any attempt at Englishization and appropriation of English calls for judicious consideration of the linguistic as well as social contexts and consequences.

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