

# PROSPECTS OF ENGLISH AS A LANGUAGE OF COMMERCE

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## ABSTRACT

*Today's world of globalization marks an unprecedented simultaneous growth of business, communication and transportation. It is notable that the volume of national and international trade is growing at a rapid pace and has brought the world economies and culture in a closer union. The modern trade and communication, often being complex activities, bring with them a greater reliance on a Lingua Franca. Regional languages appear to be the preferred medium of communication for localized trade and commerce, but as the trade grows and becomes inter-regional; businessmen seem to shift their use of language to English. A similar kind of trend can be seen in some areas of Europe, where French, German and Spanish are being used as the languages of trade. However, the overall pattern seemingly suggests that in spite of the use of other languages in the national and international trading, English has become a common language of interaction.*

*Number of the speakers of English has crossed almost a billion and it has given birth to innumerable varieties of English, ironically creating a chaos in the international communication. In such pressing circumstances, Global English, which has already started emerging on the international arena, seems to be the sole solution for communication in the business world. Now the question arises what should be the style of writing Global English so that the problem of unintelligibility can be tackled? What kind of adaptation, style, level, selection of words, grammar is required to communicate within an inter-cultural as well as cross-cultural current setting. This paper tries to seek answers to these questions. There is also an attempt to study the contemporary scene of English as a Business Lingua Franca. At the same time the paper explores its future taking into consideration the emergence of Brexit vis-à-vis India and China as the newly recognized economies of the world.*

**Keywords:** *Brexit, Commerce, Commercialese, Global English, Globalization, Lingua Franca.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Today's world of globalization marks an unparalleled concurrent growth of commerce, communication and transportation. The amount of national and international trade is mounting at a brisk tempo and it has brought countries and cultures in a closer union. The contemporary trade and communication are often intricate: goods are purchased from one country, developed by another, sold to yet another, resold and so on. Such multilateral channels bring with them an increased dependence on a Lingua Franca. Provincial languages appear to be the favored medium of communication for localized trade, but as it grows and achieves an inter-regional scale; men seem to transfer their focus of language to English. A comparable tendency can be observed in some areas of

Europe, where French, German and Spanish are being used as the languages of trade. In Europe there is a growing indication that English has become a main language of trade and commerce while German and French are confined to trade within Europe. This is evident from the proposal made by German Chamber of Commerce that English is to be used as the exclusive language for sixty four countries, while German to be used as a language of trade with only Austria (David Graddol, *The Future of English?* 29). English is widely used for international dealing in the US and Japan. However, the pattern apparently suggests that in spite of the use of the other languages in the national and international , English has turned out to be a universal language of commerce.

The number of users of English has crossed almost a billion. The British Council has reported that the number of the users of English as a foreign language is almost double than that of as a first language and as a second language (*The Future of English?* 10). The level of competency of many of the second language and EFL users may not be up to the mark in most of the cases and this may be one of the reasons for the birth of various varieties of Englishes. The worldwide communication, which involves trade interactions also, will surely end up in a chaos if such varieties become its part. Today most of the world's mails and electronic information are in English. Further, many industry houses spend an enormous amount of money in translating their web contents, promotional material, marketing collaterals and credentials to the other foreign languages in order to make them intelligible for people living across the globe. However, it is not cost effective to practice translation considering the large number of languages. In such a pressing scenario, Global English seems to be the only option to deal with the problem of unintelligibility in communication. This becomes quite pertinent in the case of the fast growing world economies like China and India. Graddol considers that India is the only country in the South East Asia (although China is fast catching up) to utilize its Anglophone legacy and link it with Global economies (*English Next* 94).

## **II. MECHANICS OF WRITING**

Now if English becomes the Global Lingua Franca, will the purist approach of writing commercial English be appropriate? But if the answer is in negative then it has to be explored what should be the mechanics of writing such English? English is a living language as it has been evolving and changing from time to time. The users have to acclimatize themselves to the necessities of the contemporary field. An attempt has to be made towards focusing on aspects like adaptation to the mental frame of the receiver, selection of words and necessary changes in style and grammar.

Vimala S defines Global English as a “Denationalized and simplified variety of the English language. It is even called World Englishes or ‘Standard English.’ Global English can be termed as a deglamourized variety of English” (Online: “Global English...”<sup>1</sup>). The study of the mechanics of writing appropriate English has to start with a discussion on the basic need for adaptation which is fundamental to all kinds of communications. Raymond Lesikar, and others write, “By adaptation we mean the message to the specific reader” (*Basic Communication* 19). No two people can be alike. Especially the people across the globe do not have the same vocabulary, knowledge, mentality, experience, background, emotions and so on. The vastness of these differences presents a major problem in communication which to some extent, is culture specific and one needs

to be more open minded and tolerant. “Treat your counterpart not as you would like to be treated but rather as he/she would like to be treated” (R C Sharma 8), appears to be a fit council for communicators of this field. Experts agree to the use of the skill of adaptation. Francis Soundararaj opines: “The foremost principle that underlies effective communication is that it should help the correspondents understand each other fully as well as the purpose of communication. Total understanding is more than an understanding of the language one uses in a letter” (*Effective Communication* 74).

Adaptation begins with visualizing your receiver – who they are, how much they know, what their educational level and their attitude are. Hence, keeping a mental picture in mind, one should make selection of words, level of usage, style, grammar. Adaptation is easier if one is communicating with a receiver of one’s own level. However, in this field, one may find oneself communicating with people who are below their educational level or less informed on the subject concerned. Here there is a need to use simpler words and concepts that a receiver may understand; otherwise this may result in under-received communication. The use of difficult vocabulary may also hurt the dignity of a self-conscious recipient. In case of multiple receivers of different levels, aiming at the lowest level of the group is probably the best choice. Moreover, one may run the risk of offending those at higher level. Here tight corner situation can be avoided by using expressions like ‘as you are already aware,’ ‘as you know’ and so on.

Basic feature of all exchanges should be clarity. Once they master the skill of adaptation, and there comes the matter of the effective use of language. An effective communication depends primarily on the aspects of linguistic precision and clarity.

Writing in a language that one has adapted to may not be as easy as it appears to be. To do the job well, a writer should try to present the message that will create a meaning in the recipient’s mind. According to Lesikar and Pettit, “Writing that is slightly below the reader’s level makes the most comfortable reading” (*Communication...* 98). Results of the research done by Robert Gunning and Rodolph Flesch, support such simplification and say that such writing communicates the best (98). Readability of a reader is very important and one has to take care of word choice.

### 2.1. Use of Familiar Words

The first step towards word selection is to use words that are familiar to the readers. ‘Familiar words’ is a relative expression as what is familiar vocabulary to some may be of high level to others. Here the best option would be to use words with which the reader is comfortable. It has been observed that many writers advocate the use of familiar words and use them orally too. When they start writing, they become stiff and use difficult words. Probably they do this for affectation but it affects the readability of the reader. However, there is nothing wrong with hard words only if they are used selectively. The right choice would be to use words one would use in oral communication with the reader. The following are some examples of unfamiliar and familiar words:

#### Unfamiliar

Antiquated  
Antagonistic  
Endeavour  
Continually

#### Familiar

Old/ obsolete  
Hostile/opposite  
Attempt/Try  
Constantly

## 2.2. Use of Concrete Words

Good communication is marked by words that form sharp and clear meaning in mind. These are concrete words and they should be preferred to the abstract ones. Concrete words make for a lively and effective reading as they paint a vivid picture in the reader's mind. "Abstract nouns", suggests Reader's Digest, "are less vigorous than concrete nouns" (*How to Write...* 33). For example, 'Offensive odour' is a vague term. Concreteness in the expression comes if it is replaced by 'Odour of decaying fish.' H. W. Fowler in his dictionary of *Modern English Usage* correlates the habit of using the abstract language to a disease and calls it "Abstractitis" (Quoted in Sanyal, *Indlish* 16). Abstract terms may convey broad meanings like concepts and ideas. For instance see how the following concrete expressions are more effective than their abstract counterparts:

Abstract	Concrete
The highest reaches of management	The top managers
The negotiating process	Negotiations
In the near future	by Monday

## 2.3 Words with Right Strength and Vigour

Effect of concreteness becomes manifold if the words with right strength and vigour are selected. Out of these verbs and nouns appear to be much stronger in effect than adjectives and adverbs. Lesikar, while discussing the comparative strength of verbs and nouns, mentions that verbs are stronger than nouns (*Lesikar's Basic Communication* 25). Verbs are action words and where there is action there is way. Nouns are the doers of action; hence they also attract attention. Contemporary English sentences have always operated on verbs, while the Victorian influence gives precedence to noun over the verbs. One can be more direct if the everyday word 'smell' is used as in 'The cake smells good,' in place of 'The cake exudes appetizing aroma.' Adjectives and adverbs are weak words. They add length and distract the reader from the key words. Objectivity is the call of the day while adjectives and adverbs bring in subjectivity. An online publicity, heavily loaded with adjectives, may give an impression of pleading with the consumer. Voltaire calls the adjectives as the enemy of the noun. One would agree that the announcement – 'we are in trouble' – has a more nerve wrecking effect than – 'we are in real trouble.' Then the use of the adverb 'that is entirely beside the point' seems to weaken the force. The adjective and the adverb do have the utility, when they are used to define or refine rather simply emphasize. One just needs to convert nouns, wherever possible, into verbs and delete overblown adjectives and adverbs. For the contemporary communication, as Jyoti Sanyal writes, "We need only to switch from the Victorian way of writing with a string of adjective-laden nouns and work with verbs feed of their burden of their adverbs" (269).

## 2.4 Camouflaged Verbs

Camouflaged means disguised. Sometimes verbs meant to be used as verbs are disguised as nouns. Then an action word is added to complete the structure. Suppose we change the verb, 'reconcile' into noun 'reconciliation,' action words have to be added and the sentence may be: 'Reconciliation was achieved in the broken negotiations between the companies.' The sentence hinders direct expression as compared to the plain

one: 'We reconciled the broken negotiations between the companies.' Such expressions will bring in concreteness, clarity and directness in communication.

## **2.5 Other Undesirable Factors**

Apart from the above discussed components of using English in an effective environment, there are certain aspects of language which should also be avoided. They are jargons, clichés, redundancies, ambiguities, hyperboles. Jargons may create difficulties in comprehension and make the style formal and stiff and therefore should be replaced with simple words. Ambiguous sentences should be avoided as the intended message may not reach the target. Careless use of pronouns, wrong placing of adverbs and faulty punctuations are some of the reasons that cause ambiguity. Such uses hinder a clear and direct written interaction.

## **2.6 Construction of Clear Sentences**

The task of arranging words into clear sentences is equally important. Clarity, coherence and cohesion are the three main qualities of organizing a paragraph into a unit.

### **2.6.1 Use of Short Sentences**

Contemporary commercial English favors short sentences. What constitutes a short, readable sentence is related to the reader's ability to comprehend it. Usually sentence length is closely related to the presence of clarity. Harold Evans, a British Journalist Guru, has explained that a short sentence should have one thought or closely connected ideas (Quoted in Sanyal 46). Rudolph Flesch, a known figure in 'Readability Studies' has shown that the average length of the Elizabethan written sentence ran to about 45 words, the Victorian to 29 and ours to 20 words. Flesch also drew up a test to assess the 'reading ease' and the 'human interest.' He took into account number of words, sentences and word length and could deduce the readability and human interest of the written message ("The Way of Flesch"). Hence, it can be noticed that the length of an average sentence has gone down. A contemporary newspaper used a heavily loaded sentence that went up to 85 words. Such long sentences are hardly welcomed in modern communication. Writers may use long sentences occasionally, for completing a thought or for variety, as too many short sentences together may make reading jerky. But care has to be taken to maintain clarity and to limit the optimum average length of a sentence to about 18-20 words.

English generally uses sentence structures of Subject + Verb; Subject + Verb + Object and Subject + Verb + Adjunct. While there should be a variety of structures in a composition, a frequent use of these combinations would be suitable for commercial interactions. Intra structural inversions make a composition weak, while long sentences are not preferred in writing. Too many subordinating and coordinating connectors increase the length of a sentence as well as decrease its clarity and at the same time disturb the established structure. See the overuse of the connectors: 'The manager, who was advised by his Marketing Director, identified a location, which is centrally situated.' A cohesive structure would be: 'The manager provided a location in the market on the advice of the Marketing Director.'

### **2.6.2. Use of Active Voice**

It has been observed that active voice is better suited to the current global communication than the passive voice. The active structure produces stronger writing as it emphasizes the action and at the same time economizes words. The active structure appears to be more vigorous as the doer of the action acts and the verb is short and clearer being in the first form. The passive voice diminishes the importance of the doer and lacks in

personal touch. Overuse of passive leads to circumlocution, and this finally results in verbosity. Sanayal rightly asserts, “Wordiness mars all writing; the unnecessary passive voice drains writing of life” (*Indlish*, 285). The active sentence is shorter and conveys the message directly and forcefully. George Orwell, advised writers to avoid passive voice when they can use the active form. Indians seem to consider the passive expression as elegant and formal. Probably the reason lies somewhere in the use of ‘Commercialese,’ which arrived in India through British merchants and entered into the Indian society via the ‘Baboos.’ Today when India is fast emerging as the new economic power of the world, Indian companies need to use the contemporary English. The following two sentences are virtually identical in meaning but not in impact: ‘Purchases are made using numbered order forms, copies of which are retained’ and ‘Whenever we make a purchase, we use a numbered order form and retain its copy.’

Nonetheless, passive voice is sometimes preferred when the doer of the action is unimportant, unknown or the writer does not want to mention it. It may be used for the reason of style and variety. The passive structure also helps avoid mentioning the doer of action if there is a need to hide him/ her.

### **III. STYLE**

Overall style of writing a message plays a very important part in making it recipient friendly. Traditionally speaking communication demands a very stiff formal style that can still be found in practice in many places. However, the modern complex setting prefers a relaxed formality on the part of the writer. Nowadays this extreme formal approach is being replaced by a conversational style, ‘write-as-you-speak’ trend of writing. Rudolph Flesch began his ‘write-as you-speak’ crusade in the USA in 1950s with the publication of his book, *The Art of Readable Writing*. It is believed that the technique of writing conversational language leaves a good-will effect, as the language is warm and friendly but in one has to guard oneself against getting too much colloquial. To some extent it also depends on the mutual relationship of the writer and the reader. Here it would be advisable that the writer should use a balanced style somewhere between the two extremes of formality and informality.

#### **3.1. You-Attitude**

The matter of dignity has a weight in the style of writing. Soundararaj has commented, “A correspondent writes from the strength of self-dignity as one individual to another whose dignity is equally important” (77). Whether formal or informal, a writer has to be courteous giving full regard to the receiver. This can be achieved by adopting ‘you-attitude’ as against the ‘I/we- attitude.’ The ‘you-attitude’ is recipient-centered and involves writing from the view point of the wishes, preferences, and needs of the recipient. While the ‘I/we- attitude’ shows an ego centric and closed style, ‘you-attitude’ depicts an exocentric, open and positive approach. Although the writer’s benefit is inherent, it should not be the main point of the communication. In letter take trouble to show the reader that it will be to his/her advantage to take action you are suggesting in the letter. (Urmila Rai, 133) In commercial transaction many difficult situations arise and they need mutual cooperation of the supplier and the buyer, the debtor and the creditor. The seller’s desire to sell goods and services and to make profits can be fulfilled only through the buyer’s satisfaction. The test of the effectiveness of a company’s style of communication is the number of customers it retains even after collecting dues and refusing credit terms.

### **3.2 Non-Discriminatory Writing**

Discriminatory writing is the use of language that appears to be negative to specific group of people, such as by sex, race, nationality, age or disability. Although such words are not directly related to clarity of expression, they are against human decency and etiquettes.

Perhaps the most troublesome sexist words are masculine pronouns when they are used to express both the sexes. The sentence – ‘A customer’s prompt payment will place him in the priority list’ – has the pronoun ‘him’ used for both male and female. Nowadays top positions in many houses are occupied by women, so such expressions may be taken as a sign of male supremacy. The above illustration can be re-worded as, ‘A customer, who makes prompt payment, will be placed in the priority list.’ Another way to avoid the sexist language is to make the reference plural. A revision of the above example will be: ‘A prompt payment of customers will place them in the priority list.’

Where the traditional form clearly favours a ‘– man ending,’ one could still use neutral terms as astronaut for spaceman, person for man and chairperson for chairman/chairwoman. However, Reader’s Digest believes that attempts to neutralize some sexist terms may arouse controversy. Change of mankind to humankind and man-hours to person-hours and some long- established terms like mastery, masterpiece and kingdom “would simply be to impoverish the language” (90).

## **VI. FUTURE PROSPECTS**

In the first part of the paper, we have tried to assess the contemporary scene of Global English as the world lingua-franca. The sources seem to suggest that English in its new avatar is definitely going stronger. But will it retain its pre-eminence in future too? The answer to this question appears to be ‘yes’.

The eminence of English as a language is not only of today but its dominance can also be traced back to the golden era of the British Empire, when it started expanding and establishing contacts with the rest of the world. Although the style of writing English has tremendously changed, the language is the same. It can be inferred that the roots of English are quite strong and they are still holding the tree firmly. This solid foundation seems to indicate that it is unlikely to be displaced by any other language of the world.

English has truly become a Global Language. Today about one third of the world population speaks and uses English and the users are increasing everyday. David Crystal has estimated that more than 85% of international organizations use English as their language (*The Future of English?* 8). Along with this one can observe the unprecedented growth of globalization, and communication. With the rise of such closely inter- related parallel trends, English seems to be the suitable option that will be used as world language in future. Another factor that may keep English going strong is the dominant role played by Britain and the Brexit in the world . As long as these countries maintain their economic superiority, English will keep enjoying its status.

In this regard, it appears appropriate to bring in the reference of Brexit. English language has been enjoying a place of eminence as an official EU language of diplomacy and commerce since the pre-Brexit days, when Britain was the part of the European Union (although the formal exit of Britain from the EU is still awaited). However, a question is often asked amongst diplomatic and circles: does Brexit marks the end of English as the lingua franca in the EU? But the debate indicates the readiness of some countries like France and Germany to

reconsider the EU's language policy once the UK leaves. However, David Fernandez Vitores, after a careful exploration of all such issues, writes, "the removal of English from the list of official languages could be extremely difficult .... it is almost impossible to think that English will disappear from the EU's institutional framework" (2). Ironically, he expects English to further solidify its position as it is "a world lingua franca in an increasingly globalised environment" (3). Taking cue from this futuristic remark, one is able to assume that in the post Brexit era, the EU countries, for the growth of their trade, will have to maintain ties with the rest of the world. Recently the UK has been observed exploring the feasibility of a train link with China. In all such cases the link language will be English.

## **VII. CONCLUSION**

The discussion carried out in the paper indicates that English has emerged as a language of international commerce and will retain its status. Future may pose some challenges from Asian languages like Chinese due to their recent heavy economic growth. However, the chances seem to be remote as the countries like China have started giving a lot of importance to the teaching of English in their schools. Finally, speaking from the Indian point of view, we all know that Indian economy is growing rapidly and India has already shown signs of influencing the world economy. Parallel to this, there is a sudden growth in the number of English users in India. Graddol has also viewed, "... Asian countries will determine the way English is being used globally in industry, commerce and Internet in the decades to come" (Bani, 2). This rise in the number of English users has come to India at the right time. The global use of English as a lingua franca will only help Indian to grow internationally. However, Indian houses need to switch from the Victorian way of writing English and adopt more contemporary forceful and direct expression which is the strength of plain English.

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