# UNIT 3 : INDIAN ENGLISH : QUESTIONS OF STANDARD FORM AND INTELLIGIBILITY

**Structure**

## 3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit is designed to enable you to

- understand the notion of "standard" in relation to languages

- get an insight into the implications of the notion of "Standard Indian English"

- become familiar with different views and perspectives in relation to SIE

- appreciate the different dimensions of the notion of "intelligibility".

## 3.1 INTRODUCTION

The preceding two units have dealt in some detail with the notion of varieties (both native and non-native) and the Indianisation of English. In this unit we shall examine the notion of "Standard Indian English" (SIE). The questions we shall try to answer are: "How viable and useful is the notion of SIE ?" and "What relation does SIE have with native standard varieties such as American English and British English? "We shall also go into the question of the status and acceptability of SIE and see if it has to be viewed as "deviant", "divergent", "deficient/inadequate" or simply as "different" from native standard varieties. Another issue that we shall discuss in some detail relates to the intelligibility of SIE. This, obviously, has two dimensions: international (pan-Indian, inter-regional) intelligibility and international (global) intelligibility as far as native and non-native users of English are concerned. In other words, how far is SIE intelligible for Indians across different regions, and what is the degree of its intelligibility in international contexts?

## 3.2 STANDARD INDIAN ENGLISH (SIE)

### 3.2.1 Standard Language

Whenever a language is used by a large community spread over vast areas, different
varieties develop. Out of these varieties, because of social, educational and historical
factors, one variety comes to be recognised, codified and accepted as "standard" for a
variety of social and political factors.This "standard" form of language then acquires
prestige, comes to be associated with "educatedness" and is upheld as a "model" that has to
be followed, cultivated and cherished. The standard form is promoted and propagated by the
education system and receives institutional support. If we look at the native varieties of
English we will find that while one variety of British English has come to be recognised as
Standard British English, another variety of English has come to be accepted as Standard
American English, a third as Standard Australian, and so on.These native standard varieties
then become the basis of all grammars, dictionaries, pronunciation manuals, thesauruses
and descriptions of usage. These , in turn, become representations of a "norm" because of its
association with the rich and the elite, a pedagogical ideal and a status symbol. Here, two
things need to be remembered. One, any language, spoken by a large community of users
spread over geographically distant or politically distinct regions is bound to develop several
standard forms. In the native contexts of English, we have Standard British English,
Standard American English, Standard Australian English, etc. Thus the notion "Standard"
does not imply that there is one, single standard form. The second thing we have to
remember is that the variety that has come to be recognised and upheld as "standard" is not
inherently superior or better. It is only that there is a general consensus about it being
"standard". Thus we have, even within native contexts, several standard Englishes.

### 3.2.2 Standard Indian English

Among the non-native varieties, most of which grew and spread as a consequence of British
colonial expansion, Indian English is the most widely used. As stated is an earlier unit, we
have in India a large number of people who learn and use English for a wide variety of
purposes. At this point, one would do well to remember that in the initial stages of the
arrival and spread of English in India, Standard British English was the model to be
followed, the norm to be upheld and the pedagogical ideal to be pursued and emulated. But
as English spread all over India, and as more and more Indians with different Indian
languages as their respective L1, began to learn and use English in the Indian socio-cultural
contexts, Indian English drifted away from Standard British English. This was inevitable.
Furthermore, English in India, interacting with several Indian languages, developed several
regional varieties. This too was inevitable. What is interesting to note, however, is that
operating under two pressures -- one from native Standard English (primarily British and
secondarily, American) and the other from major regional languages of India, a kind of
standard form of English has emerged in India. This standard Indian English (SIE) is neither
British English nor American English. It is also not Bengali English or Tamil English or
Punjabi English. It is, rather, a pan-Indian standard form in which most of the regional
features have been neutralised, and which is used by educated Indians who constitute the
most important and influential section of Indian society. This pan-Indian English (SIE) is
used by professionals, scholars, bankers, traders, bureaucrats, scientists, etc. These are the
users who give form and substance to SIE through literature, newspapers, journals,
electronic media, education and administrative communications. These are the competent,
efficient, "adequate" bilingual Indian users of English, and their English is generally
recognised as Standard Indian English.

### 3.2.3 Views About Standard Indian English

Despite a general agreement about the currency and acceptance of SIE, adequate
descriptions of this variety are not available. While any number of grammars and
dictionaries of Standard British English and Standard American English are available, the
same cannot be said about SIE. What is available is an assortment of descriptions of
fragments of SIE, some dealing with the sound - patterns of SIE and others dealing with
certain grammatical constructions, lexical features and stylistic innovations. However,
several scholars working on SIE have taken positions regarding the status and form of SIE.
While it is clear that SIE deviates from Standard British or American English, there is no

unanimity about the scope and range of this deviation. The problem arises perhaps because IE refers not to a single variety but a set of many varieties across the whole spectrum--the Indian doctor communicating with professional colleagues at an international conference, the Indian clerk communicating with other Indians in his daily-life, the lorry-driver using it as a lingua franca - all these are part of the same spectrum of IE" (Strevens, 1977). Obviously Strevens is not talking about SIE here, as he clubs together people with varying degrees of competence in English. The same opinion, though with a different emphasis, is expressed by Verma (1978) who says "English in India is used by a vast body of educated people as their second or third language". Verma goes on to say "English in India represents a cline extending from non-educated varieties of English at one end (which are not all intelligible) to an internationally accepted standard form at the other. In between these two ends we have a great range of language variations. The two ends do not represent Indian English. What we have called Educated English is between the two ends". What Verma means is that somewhere at the central point of this cline we can place what may be safely called "Standard Indian English". The same view, again, is expressed by Kachru (1966) when he states, "The term Indian English is used here as a cover term for that variety of the English language which is used by educated Indians.... In terms of their proficiency care has been taken to include only the users of standard form of IE. A standard user of IE is one who ranks somewhere between the central and the ambilingual points on the cline of bilingualism". The cline of bilingualism that Kachru refers to has the following three measuring points:

i) **Zero-point** is the bottom point on the axis, but is not the end point at the bottom (e.g. Babu English, Butler English, Kitchen English).

ii) **Central point** indicates the adequate competence in one or more registers of IE (speakers who use English effectively for social control, Indian Civil Servants, English teachers, etc.).

iii) **Ambilingual point** covers those who have native - like competence in English (those few Indians who have competence in Standard British or Standard American English).

As must be obvious by now, the cline of bilingualism is linked with the degree of interference/transfer from L1 (Indian languages) in the learning of L2 (English). Thus, the more interference there is in the person's English, the lower s/he ranks on the cline. The question that one has to face here is, what kind of deviations resulting from such interference can be assimilated and become acceptable features of SIE? The nature and extent of deviations in the English used by educated Indians may vary according to their regional, social and professional background. One way of answering this question is to say that while some features of sound-patterns, grammar and lexicon have become an accepted part of SIE, others (those used by some Indian creative writers in English - e.g. rape-sister, flower-bed, king of pearls, hot-hot coffee, etc. by such writers as Khushwant Singh, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, among others) are not part of SIE, but only special stylistic devices used by these writers to describe the Indian reality. Kachru (1971) grants this point when he says, "Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Khushwant Singh are among other, Standard Indian English writers. Their use of such words as "spoiler of my salt", "sister-sleeper", etc. does not make their English substandard, nor does it mean that these words necessarily have a high frequency in Indian English (spoken or written). What I claim is that Indian writers in English are using such words as a stylistic device for creating contextually and linguistically typical Indian plot and character types".

Thus, while both agree about the users of SIE, and place them somewhere near the central point of the cline, Kachru attributes the deviations one finds in SIE to bilingual creativity and stylistic innovativeness. On the other hand, Verma looks at SIE from the perspective of dialectal variation. He claims that SIE is systematically different from Standard British or Standard American English. Thus, certain typical IE constructions are part of the "system" of SIE, and differ from native standard varieties either due to imperfect understanding on the part of the learners, or due to interference/transfer from L1.

1    Tell me *where can you* meet us, instead of

    Tell me *where you can* meet us.

2    You know him, *isn't it?* instead of

    You know him, *don't you?*

3    He *has come* here yesterday, instead of

He came here yesterday.

Thus, such constructions are seen to be "systematically" deviant from native standard varieties. Many other deviant patterns too are, thus, accommodated within SIE which, it is claimed, "is a highly structured system". Such constructions, it is also pointed out, are "part of the grammar of a great many educated speakers of English in India". Again, one is being realistic when one recognizes the presence of such deviant features and attributes "systemicness" to them, but which ones of these deviant features, and how many can be accepted as part of SIE, a standard variety that has pan-Indian acceptability?

A third view rejects the notion of SIE altogether and only accepts the presence of several varieties of IE. This view, while allowing for the notion of the cline of bilingualism, claims that only the ambilinguals are users of Standard English (which by implication means native standard forms, British or American). All other educated users of IE are then characterised as "inadequate" bilinguals or "incipient" bilinguals. This view is held by scholars like Daswani (1978) who claim "It is only the English of the inadequate bilinguals that can bear any examination as IE.... Indeed, it may be theoretically possible to identify *more than one variety of English of inadequate bilinguals*, each exhibiting a unique set of divergent features". Here we have a view of Indian English as an inadequate system, and a refusal to recognise the existence of a SIE.

The fact of the matter is that (i) we have several varieties of English in India, (ii) some form of IE is recognised and accepted in the pan-Indian context as "standard" (in administration, education, literature and the media), (iii) this SIE has several features of sound-patterns, grammar and lexicon which distinguish it from British or American Standard English, and (iv) this SIE can be viewed as a creative and innovative deviation; as a set of systematic deviations or as an inadequate or deficient form.

At this juncture, it may be appropriate to say that the upper crust elite speakers of SIE may not have even these features to distinguish them from native speakers of English. Perhaps, only on phonological grounds one would notice certain differences from native pronunciation. However, so far as phonology is concerned, even the native varieties of English are very different from each other.

## 3.2.4   The Need for Standard Indian English

While it is inevitable that Standard Indian English will continue to be compared with native standard varieties, especially American and British, there is a real pragmatic need to accept the notion of SIE. As an interesting aside one might note here that while SIE is constantly compared and contrasted with British and American standard varieties, no one has ever cared to compare it to New Zealand or Australian English. Perhaps that has something to do with the erstwhile colonial power of England and the current global power of America. However, that aspect need not exercise our minds too much, and it is not within the scope of this unit to go into the issue. What is important for us to realise is the fact that in a country like India -- with its immense geographic spread, its linguistic diversity, its long-standing contact with English and its acceptance, and cultivation of English as a language of pan-Indian educational discourse and communication -- we need to recognise and accept our own norms of pronunciation, grammar and lexicon. As a matter of fact, when we talk about systematic deviations and characteristic features of Indian English, we are moving in that direction.

We cannot escape from the fact that it is impractical, unrealistic and even futile to talk of British or American norms or models in such a vast and diverse country where millions of people learn, use and interact in English. It is futile, for example, to try to train such a huge and diverse population in terms of RP (Received Pronunication or Standard British Pronunciation). It is equally futile to expect that lexical adjustments -- either as stylistic innovations or as expressions of the Indian socio-cultural context -- can be entirely done away with. What we therefore need to do is to accept, recognise and describe adequately all the features of SIE so that a pan-Indian "norm" can be followed, and to which no "stigma" is attached. Srivastava (1991) emphasises this very point when he says "standard IE is developing only unconsciously so that while we collectively recognise its existence,

we stubbornly refuse to be called speakers of IE individually. To date, we have no significant grammar of IE, nor a dictionary of IE, although we do have any number of grammars of SE (Native Standard English) for Indian students''. This complaint is quite legitimate.

We, in India, learn Indian English, use Indian English, teach Indian English and generally see Indian English all around us. We are also aware of the distinctiveness of this Indian English, as well as, aware of the functional and operational presence of certain *de facto* norms which characterise SIE and by which we recognise SIE. Yet we seem to subscribe to external (native) *de jure* norms (British or American) and consistently talk about SIE in terms of deviations and inadequacies rather than in terms of different, distinctive features. SIE has to be recognised and described in terms of these *de facto* norms (what Kachru calls endonormative approach). To illustrate this point, let us take the two sounds of English [t] and [d] . *De jure* norms tell us that in native standard varieties these are alveolar (almost dental) stop consonants. SIE, has a corresponding set of sounds [t] and [d] which are retroflex or retracted in nature.Now, instead of talking about these two sounds as being deviant or ''incorrect'' in relation to the native [t] and [d], it would be much more useful, realistic and practical to recognise [t] and [d] as two distinctive sounds of SIE, thus recognising and upholding a *de facto* norm. Similarly, instead of talking about such constructions as ''You do know him, isn't it?" as a deviant form of ''You do know him, don't you", it would be better for all concerned to recognise the use of ''isn't it'' a uniform tag question as a de facto norm of SIE. After all Americans tend to use ''O.K.?'' in much the same way, and the Spanish speakers use''no?'' or ''yes?'' in the same way. In the same way ''krishak-Bank'', ''sub-caste'', ''gherao'' (the list is, essentially, an open ended one) can also be accepted as *de facto* norms that SIE appears to be in the process of creating.What we need is a concerted effort on the part of linguists, grammarians and lexicographers to describe these features in great detail. It is only when such a well-documented, codified description of SIE with its *de facto* norms is available that the stigma or pejorative connotation that is associated with such terms as ''Indian English'' and ''Indianism'' will cease. Moreover, such a recognition and codification of SIE will provide the language teachers with a viable ''pedagogical norm or ideal'' which they can aspire to teach their students, rather than some illusory, distant, external norm or model which they have, perhaps, only read about in books and pronunciation manuals, but which they themselves have not been able to attain.

**Check Your Progress 1**

1    What do you understand by Standard Language?

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2    Do you think we have a Standard Indian English?

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3    Try to find some typical examples of Indian English -- phrases, grammatical
constructions and say whether you consider them acceptable or not.

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## 3.3  INTELLIGIBILITY OF INDIAN ENGLISH

Over the years several scholars have expressed serious concern about the intelligibility of
Indian English. For example, Bansal (1969) treats the deviations and deflections (what we
have preferred to call features of SIE) as functional mistakes which hinder intelligibility. He
seems to adopt a *de jure* perspective in his GI (General Indian) model of IE, and appears to
advocate the rejection of the deviations and deflections, rather than their recognition as
inalienable features of SIE. This tantamounts to making a fetish of international
intelligibility. As Srivastava (1991) points out "The Australian and American
pronunciations do differ a great deal from RP yet they seem to be quite intelligible to
speakers of British English. American usage, as we know, diverged quite a bit from British
usage, and understandably so because it is the Americans' first language. But it has not
meant loss of mutual intelligibility between them and the Englishmen''.

### 3.3.1  The Notion of Intelligibility

Obviously, the concern for intelligibility of IE or SIE stems from a rather simplistic notion
of intelligibility. This notion implies, somehow, that the native speaker, irrespective of
his/her educational and regional background, is automatically intelligible to every one,
while the non-native speaker has to take extreme care in learning the L2 (English), and
assiduously try to make whatever s/he speaks intelligible to the native speaker.
Intelligibility is not such a simple notion. It can be looked at from several perspectives
depending on different contexts. Consider the following possibilities in the case of SIE
speakers/users.

**Intranational  (Inter-regional)**

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| a) | Speakers of Bengali English | Speaker of Panjabi English |
| | Speaker of Tamil English | Speaker of Oriya English |
| b) | Speakers of SIE | Speakers of regional varieities of English |

**International**

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|---|---|---|
| a) | Speaker of SIE | Non-native speakers of English (e.g. Japanese, Koreans, Phillipinos, etc.) |
| b) | Speakers of SIE | Non-native European speakers of English (e.g. Germans, French, Swedes) |
| c) | Speakers of SIE | Native speakers of English (British, Americans, Australians, New Zealanders) |

It is not simply a matter of determining whether a speakers of IE is intelligible to a native
British speaker or not. How many British speakers are intelligible (as far as their natural
speech goes) to Indians? And for that matter, how many native British speakers are
mutually intelligible to one another across regional boundaries? It is interesting to note that
as far back as 1929, Ward noted:

It is obvious that in a country the size of the British Isles, any one speaker should be capable of understanding any other when he is talking English. At the present moment, such is not the case; a Cockney speaker would not be understood by a dialect speaker of Edinburgh or Leeds or Truro, and dialect speakers of much nearer districts than these would have difficulty in understanding each other.

(As quoted in Kachru, 1985)

If this is the picture of mutual intelligibility in the context of native varieties within the British Isles, any undue insistence on intelligibility of non-native varieties vis-a-vis native British or American speakers is, to say the least , unreasonable. Moreover, as Pit Corder says, "There is some subjective social, psychological dimension in mutual intelligibility. We seem to understand those we are prepared to or expect to understand, and not understand those we do not expect to". (As quoted in Srivastava *et al*, 1991)

Let us move more logically and look at the sequence of priorities according to which the intelligibility criterion has to be invoked. For an Indian learner, the first priority is that his/her English be intelligible to others, and vice-versa, within his/her own region. We can call this intraregional intelligibility.As the IE speakers move out of their region and into the wider national arena, they need to be intelligible to IE speakers/users from other states and regions, and vice-versa. This may be termed inter-regional or pan-Indian intelligibility. The average Indian user of English, perhaps, can stop here and feel satisfied by his/her accomplishment. If s/he has to move on to the international arena (s/he would have to have special needs and special motivation for that), perhaps s/he can move a notch higher and strive for mutual intelligibility with other non - native users of English from Nepal, Sri Lanka, Singapore, the Emirates, Malaysia, Japan, Korea, Tanzania, Ghana, Kenya, etc. By this stage, s/he would have attained a degree of control over SIE that would enable him /her to communicate intelligibily with the German, French and Spanish, as also with native speakers of English in Australia, America and England.

Furthermore, the question of intelligibility is generally raised in a native vs. non-native framework. Black English in America is very different from Standard American English but the question of mutual intelligibility is never raised. Australian English is very different from British English which, in turn, is very different from American English, yet the question of mutual intelligibility is not raised. Interestingly even within the non-native varieties, those that are used by white Europeans seem to be exempt from the requirement of mutual intelligibility. It is only when one moves on to the non-white, non-Europeans, non-native varieties of English that one suddenly comes up against this notion of intelligibility. SIE is one such non-native variety. The concern for intelligibility reflects a tacit assumption that Indians, in fact everyone non-native to English, should acquire the British standard variety. The assumption is wrong. How many Indians learn English in order to be understood by native British or American speakers? And why should they anyway? And, by all accounts, SIE is as much intelligible to native speakers of English as their English is to Indians. As a matter of fact, in the recent past, there has been a growing demand for SIE. Kapoor (1991) relates from his experience at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, "for more than decade, a sort of Indian English has been taught to a large number of serious students from South East Asia and the Middle East....And interestingly, these students are now effectively functioning as their respective countries representatives in different parts of the world including the USA, the UK, Australia etc". In India, we now have a specific 'space' called English and we should decide how best to make use of it.

### 3.3.2  Intelligibility and the New Global Context

Intelligibility is not a problem peculiar to IE only. Several non-native varieties of English have developed in the former British colonies of Asia and Africa where English has come to be used as a second language. Like IE, these other varieties also are characterised by deviations and differences from Standard British English. While the Standard British variety of English remains the source of inspiration for them (as Standard American English is for the Japanese, the Koreans or the Philippines), the emergence of English as the most important language of international communication has changed the relationship between native and non-native Englishes. It is now being increasingly recognised that the non-native English-using world has an important role to play in determining the future form and structure of English. While one may grant that, in some sense, the native speakers of a language 'own' it and 'control' its future structure and form by their own usage, there are instances where this control passes into the hand of non-native users. Perhaps this process is

just beginning in the case of English. Frequently, international conferences are held where the entire proceedings are conducted in English. These conferences, often, are attended only by a few native speakers of English, the majority of the scholars coming from non-native backgrounds. One also has to remember that the non-native English-using world uses English a great deal for both written and oral communication at the regional level. Given this scenario, the future development of English is bound to be influenced a great deal by non-native varieties of English, SIE being one of them. As the functional load of English increases, and its uses as an International language expands, it is bound to absorb and assimilate features from several non-native varieties. As a matter of fact, perhaps already an internationally acceptable and widely intelligible form of English is emerging that owes a great deal to the contribution made by non-native varieties, of which SIE is one.

We can now round off this unit with a quote from Kachru (1984)

> Intelligibility is functionally determined with reference to the sub-region, the nation, political areas within the region (e.g. South Asia, South-east Asia) and internationally. True, educated (Standard) Indian English, Singapore English, Nigerian English or Kenyan English is not identical to RP or GA (General American). It is different; it should be different. Do such educated varieties of non-native Englishes create more problems of intelligibility than does, for example, a New Zealander, when he or she talks to a mid-westerner American?''

## Check Your Progress 2

1) We generally do not follow entire stretches of dialogues in British and American movies. What does this phenomenon mean in terms of the notion of intelligibility?

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2) As a teacher of English in India, do you think we can or should try to teach RP or Standard British Pronunciation?

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## 3.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have discussed the notion of a 'standard' language, and more particularly Standard Indian English. We have also tried to give you different views and perspectives in relation to SIE.

Further, since Indian English has to be understood throughout the country as well as globally, we give you some insight into the question of intelligibility of Indian English, both in the Indian context and the larger global context.

## 3.5 KEY WORDS

| | |
|---|---|
| **standard** | the variety of a language that has the highest status in a community or nation and which is based on the speech/writing of educated speakers of the language |
| **deviant** | any sound, word or sentence structure which does not conform to the norm. |
| **intelligibility** | the degree to which a message can be understood |
| **pan-Indian** | pertaining to the whole of India |
| **thesaurus** | a reference book in which lists of words with similar meaning are grouped together |
| **neutralised** | an accent in which the regional features are not prominent |
| **ambilingual** | a person who knows two languages equally well |
| **incipient bilingual** | having minimal control over the target language |
| **phonological** | pertaining to the sound system |
| **lexicon** | a list of words and idioms of any language |
| **endonormative approach** | when a langauge has a norm within the area where it is spoken. |
| **lexicographers** | a person who writes and edits a dictionary |

## 3.6 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

Bansal R.K. 1964, *The Intelligibility of Indian English. Monograph No. 4*, Hyderabad, CIEFL

Daswani, C.J. 1978, *Some theoretical implications for investigating Indian English.* In R. Mohan *(ed.) Indian Writing in English.* Bombay, *Orient Longman.*

Kachru, Braj B.1966, *Indian English: A study in contextualization.* In C. E. Bazelle *et al* (eds) In *Memory of J.R. Firth,* London, Longman.

1984, *The Indianisation of English.* Delhi, Oxford University Press.

1985, *Standard, codification and sociolingustic realism: the English language in the outer circle.* In R. Quirk and H.G. Widdowson *(eds.) English in the World. Cambridge, OUP .*

Kapoor, Kapil 1991, *Teaching Spoken English in India.* In R.S. Gupta and K. Kapoor *(eds.) English in India.* Delhi, Academic Foundation.

Srivastava, R.N. 1991, *Indian English today.* In R.S. Gupta et. al. (eds.) 1991.

Strevens, Peter, 1977, *New Orientations in the teaching of English.* London, OUP.

Verma, S.K. 1978, *Syntactic irregularities in Indian English.* In R. Mohan (ed.) 1978.

## 3.7    ANSWERS

**Check your Progress 1**

1.    See 3.2.1 for the answer

2.    Look at 3.3.3, 3.2.3, and 3.2.3 and then write your own answer

**Check your Progress 2**

Consult section 3.3 before writing your answers.