

Eastern  
Economy  
Edition

Second Edition

STANDARD  
ENGLISH AND  
INDIAN USAGE

*Vocabulary and Grammar*



J. SETHI

# **STANDARD ENGLISH AND INDIAN USAGE**

## **Vocabulary and Grammar**

**Second Edition**

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**PHI Learning** Private Limited

New Delhi-110001

2011

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J. Sethi

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**ISBN-978-81-203-4274-3**

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**Second Printing (Second Edition)      ...      ...      January, 2011**

Published by Asoke K. Ghosh, PHI Learning Private Limited, M-97, Connaught Circus, New Delhi-110001 and Printed by Meenakshi Art Printers, Delhi-110006.

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# Preface

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In England, if you go out to buy a ‘marriage anniversary’ card, you may fail to get one. For there is no such thing as a ‘marriage anniversary card’, and this, simply because there is no such thing as ‘marriage anniversary’ in the first place. What you celebrate instead is a ‘*wedding* anniversary’.

The questions to ask therefore are: Where do we say ‘marriage’ and where do we say ‘wedding’? When do we say ‘purchase’ and when do we say ‘buy’? Is it all right to say ‘The Prime Minister wanted that rural economy should grow faster’ or should we rather say ‘The Prime Minister wanted rural economy to grow faster’?

These are some of the questions that started bothering me a long time ago. There are, I realized, some ‘peculiarities’ in the English we use in India (and some neighbouring countries) and such ‘peculiarities’ arise from some divergences from what is called ‘Standard English’ (SE)—a term usually employed to speak about that large stock of vocabulary, grammar, and idiom common to all educated native varieties of the language. The term is not applied to pronunciation, in regard to which there exist around half a dozen different well-established standards.

The reality that our usage of English does not *fully* conform to SE is generally not appreciated by most users of the language in this country. Mercifully, though, such divergences are relatively few in relation to the entire stock of vocabulary, grammar, and idiom in this language. Had this not been so, our English would long have ceased to be of any use at the international level.

In the foregoing paragraphs, I have used the term ‘usage’ without defining it. While a lengthier explanation of the term will follow in Chapter 1, here I must content myself with Cobuild’s definition of it (*Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*): “(Usage is) the way in which words are actually used in a particular context, especially with regard to their meanings”. Thus, good usage would clearly suggest the use of the right word in the right place and in a right grammatical construction. Subscribing to this view, this book on usage deals with the use of the right words and phrases,

the right idiomatic expressions, and the right grammar. But with all these, it deals only in respect of the noted divergences in Indian usage from SE. Some examples in the opening paragraph illustrate this point; more will follow in Chapter 1.

By now you will have noticed that I have carefully avoided the use of the term 'Indian English'. This is done on purpose, for a variety of reasons: To begin with, I am not quite sure whether the users of the term use it for the totality of English as used in India or only for that relatively small part of it that deviates from SE. And then, to make matters worse, some users use it for usage alone, others mainly for pronunciation, and still others for both. And even more objectionably, I apprehend that some users use the term rather pejoratively, assigning it labels such as 'Hinglish', which sounds like calling it names and denigrating it. Above all, for me, the strongest reason for avoiding the term is the fact that we possess no documented account of it in the shape of a dictionary, a grammar, and a complete description of its sound system *in its own terms*. In this regard, I go along with Randolph Quirk, who rejects the use of terms such as 'Nigerian English', 'South Asian English', 'Singaporean English', and regards them as "misleading if not entirely false". Quirk's view in this matter is founded on two important criteria: one, that such varieties are not adequately described at various linguistic levels, and two, they cannot therefore be used as pedagogically acceptable models.\*

Given this situation, I decided to coin the term 'Indian Usage' (of English), 'IU' for short, to refer to all aspects of educated Indians' English, except its pronunciation. This term, as I am going to use it, encompasses the totality of the usage of English in India, and not just that part of it which diverges from Standard English. However, since a large part of Indian usage of English does in fact conform to SE, and on SE a good deal of literature is available already in the form of dictionaries and grammar books, the need now is to deal with the other relatively small part, viz., the part that diverges from SE. This book does precisely that.

Here I must state that the term 'Indian usage' is not being employed here in any pejorative sense. Also, the terms 'diverge' and 'divergence' (from SE) do not suggest any degree of inferiority of IU items used in place of the corresponding SE ones. (In passing, I may also add that many of the divergences noted in IU are found in the English used in a few other Asian countries as well.)

Another point that needs to be stated clearly is that my concern in this book is not with any Indian language expressions used frequently in English dailies and magazines in India, e.g., '*shilanyas*', '*pooja*', '*desi*', '*challan*'. It is not even with translations into English rendered for special effects by writers such as Mulk Raj Anand. It is, rather, with *English* words and

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\*From 'The question of standards in the international use of English' in *Language Spread and Language Policy*, Georgetown University Press, 229–41.

phrases used differently in IU, Indian coinages in English, and English sentences not conforming to the grammar of SE.

Besides 'IU', there are two more terms, I coined for the convenience of reference. These are 'BU' for British Usage and 'AU' for American Usage. The need to use them arose at very few places—only where usage in these two major varieties of the language differed from each other. For the rest, the term 'SE' (i.e., Standard English) was found to be good enough to refer to the vast common core of educated native speakers' usage of English worldwide.

To move on, the material for this book was collected over a long period of time through my contacts with fellow countrymen whose English was otherwise good and well-stabilized. Even so, before noting down anything that appeared to be an instance of divergent usage, I made sure that it was not a freak one-time occurrence, but an instance of established usage in the speech community. Whenever in doubt as to whether an item thus collected conformed to SE or not, I checked it with native speakers and/or dictionaries and standard books on usage.

Here I need to point out that quite a few items included in this book are the same as those found in an earlier book written by my former colleagues, Nihalani, Tongue, and Hosali (*Indian and British English*, OUP, 1979). This should cause no surprise. After all, the people whose English I heard and collected materials from were not, in respect of their usage, very different from those whom Nihalani et al. had heard earlier. (In passing, I must strongly recommend that book also to my readers—see Bibliography.) Readers will, however, note that my treatment in this book is entirely different from that in Nihalani et al.

And now, here is a little digression. I have heard some people express apprehensions that by using SE expressions in place of the divergent, but widespread IU ones, they will render their English unintelligible to their fellow listeners and readers. These apprehensions, I would like to claim, are totally unfounded. They have even less substance than a similar fear expressed regarding pronunciation. Then, one also hears an argument that most Indian users of English do not need to learn SE expressions in place of the deviant IU ones because they may not need to communicate at the international level. This argument is, to me, unjust and discriminatory—in no way different from the argument that most children need not learn English because they may not use it in their later lives.

If in the above paragraph, I have given the impression—albeit unwittingly—that all deviant IU expressions must be replaced by their SE equivalents, then I must hasten to correct it. I find that a number of such items are definitely useful in the Indian context, and in all such cases, I have opined that they should be retained. Further, in regard to some of the Indian coinages, such as 'examinership' and 'derecognize', I have held the view that their inclusion in Standard English could easily enrich that language.

And now a word of caution. Although the material presented here has taken me several years to collect, I can make no claim that it is exhaustive. For tomorrow someone may come up with an expression, which, on checking, I may find to be non-SE. All such items I can consider for a future edition of the book. For the present, all I can claim is that the collection is fairly large, and therefore any readers who make the optimum use of the book will bring their English much closer to SE, thereby making it much more intelligible and acceptable worldwide. Another claim I can make is that English-knowing foreigners coming to this country will face fewer problems of comprehension if, by going through this book, they become aware of certain 'special' features of Indian usage of English. In this connection, it has been observed that "native speakers of English visiting India are often struck by these (Indian) usages, which differ, sometimes substantially, from their own" (Nihalani et al.: 3). This book, I expect, will prepare such visitors to expect certain divergences and at the same time enable them to interpret them correctly.

The observation I made above has brought me to the point where I can state clearly who this book is addressed to. It is addressed, first and foremost, to all those Indian users of English who already use fairly good English, but nevertheless, want to make it still better by bringing it closer to SE. In particular, then, the book is expected to prove specially useful for those who come into contact with the international community face-to-face, or in writing, or on the phone. Next, it is addressed to all those foreigners who come to this country to reside here for a while. To these two categories, I must add a large number of young Indians aspiring to settle abroad in English-speaking countries and students going abroad for higher studies. Lastly, but also very importantly, the book is addressed to teachers of English in India. For them the ability to present SE forms of certain IU deviants will be like an extra qualification and a matter of professional pride. My best wishes to all of them!

And now just a few words about the language and style adopted in the book. As for the language, since the book is meant for self-study, a conscious effort has been made to avoid technical terminology. Where, however, this was just not possible, the terms used have been duly explained at appropriate places. As for the style, it is informal and reader-friendly. I have not hesitated to use 'I' in preference to the editorial 'we', and 'you' in addressing the reader. The explanations and notes are generally in a relaxed style. These measures, I believe, will make the book easily readable.

Before I conclude, I would like to thank all those who helped me in the preparation of this book. First in this list are two colleagues, who offered me valuable suggestions, leading to a veritable improvement in the book. They are Dr Kamlesh Sadanand, Former Professor, CIEFL, Hyderabad, and Dr Pushpinder Syal, Professor of English at Panjab University, Chandigarh. Then there are those with whom I discussed certain doubtful points from

time to time. Of them, my daughter-in-law, Sangeeta and my son, Vanit, stand out. Being a teacher of English herself, Sangeeta was in a position to judge whether certain 'peculiar' usages were in fact a reality or not. Also, I must not forget to mention my daughter, Nandita, and my son-in-law, Ashok, both of whom helped and guided me a lot in the task of computer-typing and formatting. Next, I must not fail to acknowledge that I myself learnt a good deal about Standard English usage from some educated native speakers of the language and several books on the subject including, in particular, Nihalani, Tongue, and Hosali's *Indian and British English*. Finally, my thanks go out to all those users of English in India whose usage supplied me with the material for this book. Without them, this book would not have been possible.

And now, to conclude, I must admit that there is, in this book, a large scope for further enlargement and improvement. For any suggestions in this regard, I shall be sincerely grateful.

**J. SETHI**

# Abbreviations Used

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Adj	Adjective
ALD	Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of English
AU	American Usage
BU	British Usage
Cambridge	Cambridge International Dictionary of English
Cobuild	Collins Cobuild English Dictionary
Compact Oxford	Compact Oxford Dictionary Thesaurus
DO	Direct Object
HT	Hindustan Times
IO	Indirect Object
IU	Indian Usage
Longman	Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English
(n)	(noun)
O	Object
Prep	Preposition
S	Subject
SE	Standard English
V	Verb
(v)	(verb)



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