



New book on Indian English

'Indlish – The Book for Every English-Speaking Indian'

by Jyoti Sanyal

is available from Viva Books, price 295 rupees

394 pages, paperback, ISBN: 81-309-0281-8

www.vivagroupindia.com

See also <http://www.indlish.net>

The blurb says: 'Do Indians equate "impressive" English with incomprehensible English? Many unfortunately do. Clumsy Victorian English hangs like a dead albatross around each educated Indian's neck. Our feudal culture frowns on directness of expression. Indian English is often no more than an Indian language in disguise. With this funny, quirky book Jyoti Sanyal launches an all-out war against bad English and offers modern-day antidotes to archaic Indlish.'

The book includes many examples of Indian journalism and officialese which Sanyal's opinionated, scholarly and acerbic commentary lacerates at every opportunity. It is based on articles first published in the Language column of The Statesman, Calcutta from 1999-2000.

Martin Cutts of Plain Language Commission has edited the book and written the foreword overleaf. Of the author, he writes:

'After 30 years with The Statesman, where even his friends thought him hot-headed, choleric and impatient, Jyoti Sanyal became Dean at Asian College of Journalism, Bangalore in 1997. Remembered as a hound in class and a lamb outside it by the trainees he inspired with his love of both story-telling and expressive language, Sanyal now devotes himself to Clear English India (www.clearenglish.in), which encourages people to use good contemporary English instead of Raj-day commercialese.'

Foreword to 'Indlish'

Enraged polemic though this book may be, it is also constructive, collected and funny. Where it is angry, it is righteous anger because the evils it condemns – if left unchecked – are likely to kill English as a truly expressive medium for journalistic and business writing in India. Indeed, the trend towards wallpaper English in all its clichéd drabness may already be unstoppable. This book may be the last hope for reform.

English should be clear, concise and fluent, and if it can also paint a picture, so much the better. Too often, though, it is obscure, verbose, muddled and preachy. Indian English suffers from what Dr Johnson – one of Jyoti Sanyal's favourite punch-bags – might have called flatulent orotundity, a form of high-flown language that tries to impress but instead obscures. Busy readers do not want this. They want authors to have something to say and to say it in a clear, direct, vivid style – to engage them quickly with the gist of the story, to get on and tell it in an interesting way, and then to stop without adding a sermon.

I learn from this book that flatulent orotundity is partly a legacy of the Raj and the East India Company but also stems from authors applying the structures of Indian languages to English, where they rarely fit well. This heightens the contrast between the English written in India and what we use in the West, which tends to favour the active voice, uses Latinate words sparingly, and shuns the noun-heavy style so common among English-language journalists in India today.

That is not to suggest that Westerners have any monopoly on good English. We can have difficulty expressing ourselves too, but our business websites, letters and emails tend to suffer from other problems, notably crass punctuation, meaningless jargon like 'pushing the envelope', and grammar so slovenly it would disgrace a schoolchild. Here are three modern examples, the first from a London hospital explaining why it had cancelled a patient's appointment:

Unfortunately your appointment for 26 January had to be cancelled because there were no clinics running that day. It is normal practice for access to all clinics for this day being denied, however this was not possible on this occasion due to the outreach clinics still running.

– which is absurd, nonsensical...and personally signed by the chief executive.

The second is from BT, the UK's largest supplier of telephone lines, in a standard letter to householders:

As part of BT's ongoing telegraph pole renewal programme, which ensures that all of BT's overhead apparatus meet the required safety

regulation laid down in its operating licence, the telegraph pole serving your property requires renewal.

– which means, simply, ‘We’ll soon be renewing the telegraph pole that serves your property. This is part of a work programme that will help us meet new safety rules.’ Twenty-six words instead of thirty-six. The busy reader doesn’t need more.

And my third example, from a government report, supports the adage that the duller the notion, the more some writers want to cloak it in showy language:

The physical condition of a property is a fundamental determinant of its quality.

– which probably just means, ‘The quality of a house depends mainly on its condition.’

There’s a lot of shoddy writing about, so don’t imagine that only Indian English needs maintenance or that authors on the other side of the world are complying with some gold standard. Each of us who writes English, wherever we live, has plenty to learn about how to do it better.

‘Plain’ can sometimes be pejorative, yet in countries where English is most people’s mother tongue ‘plain language’ or ‘plain English’ is generally regarded as a virtue in communications with the public. English that is clear for its intended audience has become the standard to which most well-run companies aspire. In European Union countries, many types of consumer contracts must by law be written in ‘plain, intelligible language’. Regulators frown particularly on legalistic rhubarb such as hereinafter, hereinbefore mentioned, therein, notwithstanding, foregoing provisions, condition precedent, lien and reversion. In one case a major public company had to withdraw an entire 59-clause contract when the regulators decided it was not only unfair but would baffle typical readers.

The notion of plain language as a good thing is strong in other tongues, too. There has been a plain-Swedish movement for many years, influencing even the language of the law. No government bill, including proposed acts of parliament, can be printed without approval from the ministry of justice’s ‘division for legal and linguistic draft revision’. In 2000 the division revised more than 3,000 acts and ordinances in line with plain-language criteria.

To show how bad legal language can get, here is the first sentence of an Indian life insurance policy. It’s meant for the ordinary person to read:

The XYZ Corporation having received a proposal and Declaration and the first premium from the Proposer and the Life Assured named in the

Schedule and the said Proposal and Declaration with the statements contained and referred to therein having been agreed to by the said Proposer and the Corporation as basis of this assurance do by this Policy agree, in consideration of and subject to the due receipt of the subsequent premiums as set out in the Schedule, to pay the Sum Assured (together with such further sum or sums as may be allocated by way of Bonus in the case of With Profits Policies) but without interest at the Branch Office of the Corporation where this policy is serviced to the person or persons to whom the same is payable in terms of the said Schedule, on proof to the satisfaction of the Corporation of the Sum Assured having become payable as set out in the Schedule, of the title of the said person or persons claiming payment and of the correctness of the age of the Life Assured stated in the Proposal if not previously admitted.

It should be a basic right in India that consumer contracts are written in a way that the likely readers will easily understand and that the type is large enough to be highly legible. Traditional small print, full of archaic and legalistic English, should be outlawed.

In the United States – as a result of pressure from consumer groups – the laws of several states require plain language in consumer contracts, and this is backed by standards saying what will be clear to typical readers. National government has played a part. In 1978 President Carter signed an executive order requiring government regulations to be written in plain English. In 1998 President Clinton issued a memorandum, 'Plain Language in Government Writing' which began:

The Federal Government's writing must be in plain language. By using plain language, we send a clear message about what the Government is doing, what it requires, and what services it offers. Plain language saves the Government and the private sector time, effort and money.

Plain language requirements vary from one document to another, depending on the intended audience. Plain language documents have logical organization, easy-to-read design features, and use:

- common, everyday words, except for necessary technical terms;
- "you" and other pronouns;
- the active voice; and
- short sentences.

The US Securities and Exchange Commission has instructed corporations to write key parts of stock and bond prospectuses – especially the cover page, summary and risk factors – in plain language. A leading exponent of this style is Warren Buffett, the second-richest man in the world and an investor with cult status in the United States, who says:

When writing [my company's] annual report, I pretend that I'm talking to my sisters. I have no trouble picturing them: Though highly intelligent, they are not experts in accounting or finance. They will understand plain English, but jargon may puzzle them. My goal is simply to give them the information I would wish them to supply me if our positions were reversed. To succeed, I don't need to be Shakespeare; I must, though, have a sincere desire to inform.

Buffett's sincere desire to inform is lacking in so much journalism and in so many business-to-consumer documents in India. It is only when authors genuinely seek to bridge the gap between themselves and the readers that they will begin to write well. Few authors would knowingly send incomprehensible rubbish to their own family members. So why do they do it when writing for the press, colleagues and customers? Whether the reason is one-upmanship, laziness, showing off or the exercise of power, it is equally damaging and anti-social.

Jyoti Sanyal shows how to be concise, how to puncture pomposity and how to use a plainer, less pretentious style. He explains that this goes against the grain of Indian languages whose syntax gives primacy to the noun not the verb, so ears and minds attuned to Bengali and Hindi may lapse into 'nouniness' when modern English demands 'verbiness'. While showing how to avoid this and many other pitfalls, he also explains how a keen ear for dialogue, a willingness to see things from a new angle and the ability to write in pictures will inject new life into the English-language press.

There are plenty of good examples to follow, and you don't have to scour great literature to find them. As I open the sports pages of London's *Daily Telegraph*, I see that the former England cricketer Geoffrey Boycott has applied himself to his writing as thoroughly as he once did to his batting. His is the bluff, no-nonsense style of the self-taught Yorkshireman who calls a spade a bloody shovel, as in this piece published before a crucial Ashes match:

There can be no excuses this time. The players have been allowed to miss lots of county cricket and the board have granted them all kinds of helpers and hangers-on. Duncan Fletcher, their coach, has been operating with total authority. No expense has been spared on preparing the team properly, which is as it should be when money is pouring in from sell-out

crowds. Now it's time to deliver otherwise all that public goodwill will evaporate...Every batsman has to find a way to get runs. It doesn't matter whether they're ugly runs, lucky runs or edged runs. No one gives a stuff about how, it's how many.

Short sentences, vigorous expression, and a point of view: these are three of the essentials of a good writer, whether it's about sport or the price of fish. You don't need to be interested in cricket to recognize that Boycott plies his new trade better than many old-timers.

Indian journalists have a key role in improving the use of English in India because newspaper and broadcast English sets the standard for most of the population. First, they should clear up their own act by dumping the Victorian verbosity of which this book complains so eloquently. (Memo to sub-editors and programme editors: this is your job.) Second, they should regularly write about the incoherent language of the law, government officials and companies, and show how it damages the interests of consumers and businesses – public derision is a powerful weapon. Third, they should spend at least an hour a week reading the quality dailies of the UK, imbibing their often fresh phrasing and clarity of expression. Fourth, as Jyoti Sanyal suggests, they should abandon their love of cliché and tap into those sources of vivid, precise description that exist in the creative writing of India's regional languages.

Some may say, 'There are more pressing worries in India than good English – what about our telephone services, what about our drinking water?' And of course they are right – good English can never be the top priority. But when a thing's worth writing, it's worth writing well whatever else is happening. During World War II when Winston Churchill, the prime minister, was grappling with the bombing of London, he found time to write a memo to the civil service headed 'Brevity'. Part of it says:

To do our work, we all have to read a mass of papers. Nearly all of them are far too long. This wastes time, while energy has to be spent in looking for the essential points. I ask my colleagues and their staffs to see to it that their reports are shorter...

Reports drawn up on the lines I propose may at first seem rough as compared with the flat surface of officialese jargon. But the saving in time will be great, while the discipline of setting out the real points concisely will prove an aid to clearer thinking.

Churchill may have been wrong about Indian independence, but he was surely correct about writing. To him, clarity and brevity were part of a life-and-death struggle for freedom.

At the request of the Federation of Consumer Organisations of Tamilnadu, I visited India four times in the 1990s to give lectures and workshops for the British Council about clarity in business and official writing. Chennai, Delhi, Allahabad, Madurai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Coimbatore – I came, I talked, I sowed a few seeds... but I fear I conquered not. There was no vigorous flowering of plain language in Indian education, journalism or business. Had the insights of this book been available then, there might have been.

Well, those insights are here now, and I hope they will lead to clear-writing skills being widely understood and practised in India. That day will also be hastened by the training courses and editing work that the author and his colleagues will be providing under the flag of Clear English India, a business venture that Plain Language Commission is proud to sponsor.

As the author of *The Statesman Style Book* – apparently the only style guide among 415 English-language news dailies and weeklies in India – Jyoti Sanyal is uniquely qualified to write this book, and I trust you will enjoy its riches as much as I have.

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Summer 2005