

The ‘Cultural Legacy’ of English in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper assesses the status and efficacy of English in Bangladesh in the 21st century. The question it attempts to answer is: Why and how is English retaining its dominion and dissemination in Bangladesh in the 21st century? Crystal (1997: 69) propounds that the question, ‘Why World English?’ can be best explicated by a socio-cultural analysis of the growth and manifestations of English in particular contexts. Drawing upon this postulate of a very prominent linguist of this age, I would, in this paper, argue that the existence of English in Bangladesh in the 21st century gives evidence of its indomitable persistence due to its functional legacy in the social-cultural milieu in Bangladesh.

Key words: English in Bangladesh, cultural legacy of English, language policy and English.

Introduction

The continued presence and vitality of English in Bangladesh are all the more surprising. (Banu & Sussex, 2001a, 125)

The surprising state of English in Bangladesh was like the gushing of a spring, but this has gradually mellowed into a regular and natural flow of a wide river. Scholars have argued that English, though officially the foreign language of Bangladesh, is in fact the second language of this country. Despite the national language policy shoring up Bangla, the national language of the country, English frequents its dominant presence in all spheres of the national life such as commerce, industry, offices, courts, educational institutions, press, and in law and even in parliament (Banu 2000; Moniruzzaman, 2009; Rahman, 2012). This raises one inevitable

question about the status of English in Bangladesh: Why and how is English retaining its dominion and dissemination in Bangladesh in the 21st century? This paper endeavours to give an explanation to this question to illuminate the present socio-cultural state of English in Bangladesh.

Major Sections of the Paper

This paper is organized with three major sections of discussion. The first section will give a socio-historical account on the introduction of English in Bangladesh. The second section will illustrate the presence and role of English in the socio-cultural context in the 21st century. The third section will provide some discussions on the motivations behind the presence of English in these contexts. Finally, the paper will conclude with some suggestions for planning a stable language policy in Bangladesh.

The Introduction of English in Bangladesh: A socio-historical Account

Bangladesh can be linguistically defined as a ‘predominantly monolingual’ South Asian nation. The mother tongue Bangla is associated with the national identity and culture. On the 21st February of 1952, a good number of its people laid down their lives in demanding Bangla as the national language of the then Pakistan. After independence from Pakistan in 1971, language policies in favour of Bangla emerged with two prime objectives: to place Bangla at the peak of linguistic esteem, and to eliminate other languages, mainly Urdu and English. These policies successfully eliminated Urdu from Bangladesh immediately but, in the case of English, things remain conflicting and contradictory.

The anti-English sensibility in Bangladesh is rooted in the efforts of colonization in the Indian subcontinent during the British colonial era. Like many other post-colonial nations, Bangladesh also attempted to exclude English as it was comprehended to be a potential threat to the enrichment and domination of Bangla. The ‘Bangla Procholon Ain’ in 1987 was the most effective Act that proclaimed Bangla as the national and official language of Bangladesh and strictly prohibited the use of English anywhere. As a consequence of this Act, Bangla immediately replaced English in all spheres of national life and created a ‘vacuum’ in the English language proficiency and deprived the nation of numerous global opportunities for so many years (Banu & Sussex, 2001a; Rahman, 2005). Yet, in the era of globalization, the lights of

English began to shine again in Bangladesh. It reemerged as soon as Bangladesh aspired to benefit from the global culture, economy, education and technology. Rahman, et al. (2006, 1) provided their insightful explanations concerning the regeneration of English in Bangladesh:

English went underground but kept up a furtive existence. Since the early 1980s, however, a realisation of pragmatic and global needs has caused English to resurface.

English gradually overrode the national exclusionary attempts and pushed the language policies into a dormant and unrealistic state. This is reflected in the studies of researchers, linguists and ELT specialists who have extensively focused on the conflict between the language policy and the existence of English in Bangladesh. Islam (2011: 3) considers the language policy in Bangladesh to be confined to a state of ideology:

Resistance to English in Bangladesh now operates on an ideological level where a nationalist recovery of lost ground and recuperation of splintered Bengali identity demand a distance from the language which worked, for closely 200 years, as a colonial tool of consolidation and domination.

This has given birth to a somewhat chaotic linguistic state which necessitates realistic measures for a stable and unique linguistic situation in Bangladesh. And in that case, one very vital measure would be to analyze the present status and role of English in Bangladesh. Therefore, in this paper, I would endeavour to provide some updated reflections and linguistic insights on the state and role of English in Bangladesh in the 21st century. I would focus on a socio-cultural analysis of the presence of English that would underpin our argument that English persists with domination because of its functional role in the socio-cultural context of Bangladesh in the present century.

The Rise of English in Bangladesh in the 21st Century: A Socio-cultural Account

In this section, I shall depict the conspicuous presence of English in the socio-cultural context in Bangladesh with convincing evidences from the following domains:

- English in media: radio, advertising, television and motion pictures

- English in the press: newspapers and periodicals
- English in education: English at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels

English in the Bangladeshi Media

The most striking manifestation of the development of English is evident in the Bangladeshi media, principally in radio, advertising, television and motion pictures. I will commence with the use of English in radio communication.

Radio: The emergence of ‘FM Banglish’

The 21st century Bangladesh has undergone the rise of several radio channels that have emerged with diverse linguistic and entertainment displays. Presently, the four radio stations- Radio Today, Radio Foorti, Radio Amar, and ABC broadcast mainly musical and live talk show programs. The program anchors known as the Radio Jockeys (RJs) gave birth to a new speech style - FM Banglish. Mixing of English words and sentences as well as adaptation of English accent to Bangla utterances are characteristic features of this speech styles of the RJs. Basu (2009) showed some basic features of this style such as: substitution of English sounds, predominance of -z ending in pluralizations ‘friends’ /frendz/, anglicized accent’ that has influence of English intonation patterns. The following are some of the utterances of the RJs adopted from the Radio Foorti promo video:

Hello, Radio foorti listerners! Shobaike shagotom, Assalamualaikum. **Welcome to Radio 98.4 fm.** Hello Dhaka, kemon asen apnara, nishchoi valo. Ajke amader **show** te apnader jonno nie eshchi onek onek **news, international,** desh bideshi aro onek kisu. Ajo addar bishoy gulo hosse besh kisu **beauty tips,** r haa darun shob **hot spicy news.** . . R ekhon amra chole jabo gane.

(Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Ir7WT3SbvM>)

Advertising: English in Diverse Styles

The advertising media in Bangladesh reveal diverse styles of the bilingual use of Bangla and English: mixing and switching, translation, transliteration, etc. This may be discussed under two main categories of advertisements:

- **English in Spoken Advertisements:** In the following advertisement of a mobile service provider *BanglaLink*, a couple is conversing about a good day in their life. The husband forgets to wish his wife and this infuriates the wife. Finally, the mobile package, *Banglalink Timer SMS* brings suitable solution for them:

Husband: Mood off keno?

Wife: Tumi vule gesso ajker kotha, ekta wish o korlana?

Husband: Aj ki, aj ki? Yeah, special moment e wish korbo bolei etokkhon korini. "Happy Birth Day".

Wife: (Shows anger)

Husband: Tahole ki. "Happy Anniversary"

Wife: Tumi ei din prothom amake saree pora dekhe bolesile ei dinti 'Bishsha Saree Dibosh' hishebe protti bosor palon korbe, Ei hoi, bier por kisu mone thakena.

(The background voice: Eto kisu mone rekhe cholben ki kore? Kisu jinish mone rakhar daitto BanglLink SMS timer er.)

(Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84Ffr4WCF8o>)

- **English in the Written Advertisements:** The advertisements in billboards, posters, and signboards expose different forms of the use of English: Sometimes, the whole advertisement is in English; sometimes English and Bangla words are code switched.



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(Source: http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-qpq13cTPbI0/Uhi-MNTPE9I/AAAAAAAAO0A/8H313AE9oA/s1600/1150948_10201823085284689_728096946_n.jpg)

Advertisements of this sort are noticeable not only in cities but in the remotest rural areas. Surprisingly enough, the rural inhabitants who have very little orientation to English show marked manifestations of their attractions towards using English (Erling, et al. 2012).

Television: Bangla-English Bilingual Interaction

Television programs and their language use largely expose the changing linguistic scenario of Bangladeshi media. Exclusive English programs include English news, English cartoons, English debates, etc. Besides, English movie and sports channels such as Star Movies, HBO, Animal Planets, Star Sports, AXN are viewed regularly as a source of major entertainment specially among the young adults. The performers in different programs such as drama serials, talk shows, celebrity reveal a consistent pattern of bilingual interaction.

The following is one such comedy talk show program telecast in a private channel, NTV, where the presenter and the celebrity guest are found to switch to English from Bangla randomly in their speech:

(P stands for the presenter and C stands for the celebrity who is given pseudonym here).

P: Thank you. Thank you. Welcome back. Amader sathe ajke bishes otithi, porichoi dear ekdomi proyojon nei, Rafia. Rafia, look how excited the audience is!

C: Thank you for inviting me and hello everyone?

*P: Rafia, tumi evabe kauke **hello** bolle ami oggan hoe jetam r apnara eto...*

*C: Oderke gaan shoho thakte hobeto, nahole **how do they experience the presence of Rafia**. Tai na.*

P: You are great as always. Ar, Rafia, first of all , congratulations! Kisudin age Rafia ar bie holo.

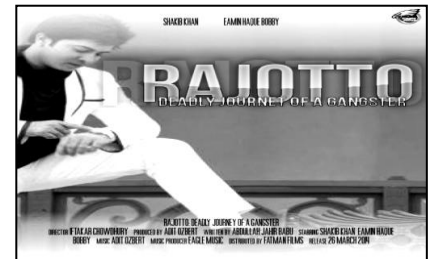
C: Thank you. Bie korle je haat tali paa jai etai hosse paa.

P: Na, eta hose dukhkher hat tali.

(Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEg3I-mUpH4>)

Motion Pictures: English in Movie Titles, Dialogues and Music

The presence of English appears in several forms in Bangladeshi movies. It is mostly evident in the recently released movies. These movies take English titles such as: Most Welcome (2012), The Dream Stage (2014), Gangster (2014). When the title is in Bangla, it is translated into English: Khoj /The Search (2012), Nishshrtho Valobasha/ What is Love? (2013), Desha: The Leader (2014). The titles also appear in transliterated English forms of Bangla such as Rajotto (2014), Antorey Antorey (2014).



(Source of wall papers: <http://boxofficebangladesh.wordpress.com/movie-wallpapers/>)

Besides, particular English expressions are used in the movie dialogues and songs: Oh my love, I'm in love, telepathy, heart, welcome, disturb, I'm very sorry, Romeo, Juliet, very very smart, hello, hi.

English in the Press in Bangladesh

The press in Bangladesh is no less decorated by English. English dailies and periodicals have daily, weekly, fortnightly and monthly circulation and sales all over Bangladesh. These include various issues of public interest: politics, business, tourism, aviation, fashion, media,

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lifestyle, literature, arts, women, social rights and so on. The following tables list some of the top-ranked English newspapers and periodicals:

Table 1: The English Newspapers in Bangladesh	
Print Newspapers	Online Newspapers
The Daily Star http://www.thedailystar.net/	The Weekly Bleezt http://www.weeklyblitz.net/
The Financial Express http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/	bdnews24.com http://bdnews24.com/
The Independent http://www.theindependentbd.com/	Bangladesh Bulletin http://www.bangladeshbulletin.net/
The Bangladesh Today http://thebangladeshtoday.com/	Bangladesh Business News www.businessnews-bd.com
The New Age http://www.newagebd.com/	Banglamail24 http://www.banglamail24.com/english/
The Daily Sun http://www.daily-sun.com/index.php	News From Bangladesh http://newsfrombangladesh.net/new/about-us

Table 2: The English Periodicals in Bangladesh	
Print magazines	Online magazines
Holiday http://www.weeklyholiday.net/Homepage/Pages/UserHome.aspx	Grameen Dialogue http://www.grameen.com/dialogue/dialogue62/Bangladesh.htm

Dhaka Courier http://www.dhakacourier.com.bd/	Cnewsvoice.com http://www.cnewsvoice.com/home_uc.php?sesID=f8e26c6891c06130d1ea2a6c101bf403
The Bangladesh Monitor http://www.bangladeshmonitor.net/	Economic Observer http://www.economic-observerbd.net/

Education: ELT is the Buzzword

The linguistic situation of education in Bangladesh reveals a thriving state of English. The emphasis on English in education has noticeably grown since studies and reports repeatedly showed that one of the prime reasons behind failure in the public examination was the poor language skills in English language subjects. Literacy in English now commences from play group of 3-4 aged children and English is learnt and taught as a compulsory subject till the tertiary level of education. English medium schools and private universities emerged as great facilitators of English in education: books of all subjects are in English, and the medium of classroom instruction is English. This has resulted in the promotion of fluent English speakers. Students of all departments go through basic English language skills courses in both public and private universities. All the universities run bachelor's and master's program in English language, literature, linguistics and ELT (Rahman, 2005).

English Language Teaching (ELT) is now a buzzword in Bangladesh. National, international, private and voluntary organizations, ELT projects (ELTIP, EIA, SEQAEP) are all working on textbook reformation, teacher's professional development, student assessment, and public examination systems, etc. (Das, et al. 2013). Besides, BELTA, NAEM, BIAM and the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) conduct in-service workshops and seminars for teachers and Teachers Training Colleges (TTCs). Bangladesh Open University and National University run teacher training programmes.

BBC Media Action has added a new digital dimension to the English language learning in Bangladesh. Since its inception in 2009, it is providing English lessons to Bangladeshi

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learners through mobile networks in reasonable charge. It also runs television programs such *BBC Janala - Mojay Mojay Shekha* in BTV and materials are available in its online websites as well (infoasaid.com, 2012)

Discussion

The examples given in the earlier section give rise to one big question, ‘What factors and motivations are functioning behind such upsurge of English in these socio-cultural domains in Bangladesh?’ This section, therefore, approaches to answer this question in terms of the instrumental motivations and psychological attractions of English that inspire the Bangladeshi people towards the productive use of English in the specific socio-cultural domains:

- The FM Banglish speech style among the RJs in the radio stations in Bangladesh serves two kinds of purposes: identity signifier and popularity determiner. Most of the RJs are from upper class elite society and academically have English medium background. They tend to signify their social-cultural and socio-educational status through the adoption of the FM Banglish style. In addition, fluency in this style is regarded as one of the criteria to qualify as a RJ in these radio stations. It is also a potential source of their popularity since most of the audience consists of the young adults to whom this style means smartness and being up to date (Basu, 2009).
- Concerning advertisements, one principal motivation of the advertisers is to add global resonance of English to the linguistic aspect of advertisements. Inclusion of English is now a major advertising strategy to increase the attractions and grandeur of the products. Banu & Sussex (2001b) noted that advertisers and businessmen switch from Bangla to English in business advertisements and commercial signs to attract consumers and to expose their prestige and image.
- In television, the use of English is motivated by two prime reasons: the adaptation of television programs for international audience of different countries; the need to modernize TV programs to compete with other national and international TV channels. In addition, the program sponsors and the performers tend to reveal their linguistic and cultural prestige to the audience through their use of English.

- The rise of Bangladeshi motion pictures in the international arena is the driving motivation behind the increasing effort to insert English expressions in the movies. Producers find it reasonable to use English to increase the comprehensibility of Bangladeshi movies to the international audience.
- The Bangladeshis also patronize English dailies and periodicals for a number of reasons. The English dailies receive a constant demand from a bulk of educated and elite class readers. These dailies have been promoted to online editions for millions of other expatriate readers who may not have access to the print version.
- In education, English is having a persistent and increasing appeal to a vast number of educators and learners. Learners are instrumentally motivated towards acquiring English language proficiency for a number of reasons: to have access to global resources of knowledge, information and technology, to succeed in academic examinations, to get jobs, etc.

At this point of the paper, we may now demonstrate that English has high frequency use in the socio-cultural sector of Bangladesh and that this sort of use is motivated by some apparent instrumental and psychological attractions. This fact rationalizes the claim stated in the beginning that the persistent rise of English in Bangladesh is due to its distinct functional role in the socio-cultural domain.

Conclusion

The random and frequent use of English proves that English is inevitable in the socio-cultural domain of Bangladesh. It is now merged into the language, identity and culture of Bangladeshis. The global essence of English is a rising need for a modern, sophisticated and comprehensible media, press and education. The competent use of English now determines the social status and prestige, and signifies the socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-educational identity of the speakers. Thus, English offers socio-cultural motivations to the Bangladeshi people and ultimately overrides the exclusionary attempts against it. This designates what Crystal (1997: 68) has claimed about the worth of English:

After all, when a language arrives in a new country, it does not necessarily come to be adopted. It has to prove its worth.

Apparently, it appears that there is jubilation about English in the minds of the Bangladeshis. However, the coin has its other side too, and that is the conflicting and often confusing state between the country's language policy and the presence of English. On the one hand, Bangladeshis desire to adopt English as a doorway to the global opportunities. On the other hand, they feel linguistically smothered by the sense of nationalism associated with Bangla. Crystal (1997, 115) clarifies this situation as an outcome of two conflicting desires: intelligibility which necessitates competence in English as a *lingua franca* and identity which compels the need to promote local languages. This sort of conflict has important consequences at the international level as well. When the conflict perpetuates, there are possibilities of international reactions from the English-speaking world which, in turn, will affect the international relations between non-English and the English nations. Crystal suggests that to avoid such possible undesirable consequences, the governments of non-English countries need to fix a clear line of language policy: whether to promote English or to develop the national language. He also suggests the introduction of bilingual policies as tentative solutions to bring the conflicts into an end:

There are ways of avoiding such conflicts, of course notably in the promotion of bilingual or multilingual policies, which enable people both 'to have their cake and eat it'. (p.116)

Therefore, in the light of what Crystal (1997) has proposed, this article would suggest one immediate linguistic initiative in the context of Bangladesh: Introduce a bilingual policy where English will be given official status. The pre-requisites of this initiative should be:

- A widespread national survey on the attitude of the general mass of Bangladesh towards a bilingual policy and towards giving English the official status.
- An analysis of the status and the role of English: whether English is an unexpected penetration or a functional flourishing legacy in different sectors of Bangladesh.
- A review of the functionality and practical appeal of the language policy to the general mass of Bangladesh in the era of globalization.

This might lead to an acceptable and essential decision of compromise in the present linguistic situation in Bangladesh. People would then be freed from all possible conflicts in the spheres concerned and would proceed towards a stable linguistic and cultural status.

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