

WORKSHOP 4

MULTILINGUALISM AND LANGUAGE CHANGE

The English language has a long and complicated history – something which we can see when we think about English etymology (where words originate). Its whole story is one of language mixing and language change. For example, can you guess where each of these English words come from?

Bungalow	Moonbeam	Boomerang	
Selfie	Google	Shampoo	Abandon
Relinquish	Algebra	Jumbo	

(**Bungalow**: Hindi and Urdu; **Moonbeam**: neologism/metaphor from Shakespeare, *Midsummer Night's Dream*; **Boomerang**: Aboriginal Australian; **Selfie**: neologism for self-photograph; **Google**: maths (1 followed by 100 zeros) via corporate trademarking into a verb as well as a noun; **Shampoo**: Hindi; **Abandon**: Old Germanic; **Relinquish**: Latin; **Algebra**: Arabic; **Jumbo**: Swahili)

These are just a few examples of the way English has expanded and changed over time both because of borrowing from other languages, and neologism (inventing or adapting new words). It is also the case that words fall out of usage, or their meaning changes over time ('gay' is one example that is often used). English, like all languages, continues to change constantly. To help understand this history a little more, you can watch a short, funny, and illuminating film by the Open University, called *A History of English in Ten Minutes*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3r9bOkYW9s>

LANGUAGE CONTACT AND LANGUAGE CHANGE: ENGLISH AND SOUTH ASIAN LANGUAGES

Now let's spend a little time thinking about just one strand of this complicated history: the relationship between English and South Asian languages like Hindi, Urdu, and Bengali. This is a relationship which we encounter in the present, for example on the streets of east London – but as we learned from long-established loan words like 'bungalow' and 'shampoo', and from the film we watched, this relationship has a very long history. The British were involved in trade in India from the early seventeenth century, and began a concerted process of colonization there – what would eventually become 'the British empire' – from the mid-eighteenth century.

There were many languages spoken in India centuries ago, just as there are now. Also, the whole system of law, land and commerce in India was conducted in Persian, which had been the language of the previous rulers, the Mughals. So, British people in India began to learn Indian languages, and adopt and adapt words for things they couldn't find an equivalent for in English. When they began to 'colonize' India – in other words, take over – they found they needed to use many of the Persian words around which the legal system was built. Gradually, a kind of language developed among the British in India which was a mixture of English with many other languages. In the 1880s, two men who had worked for the British East India Company, called Henry Yule and Arthur Burnell, recorded this language in a huge dictionary called *Hobson-Jobson*. It has over 2000 entries! Here are just a couple of examples:

DUMBCOW, v., and **DUMB-COWED**, participle. To brow-beat, to cow; and cowed, brow-beaten, setdown. This is a capital specimen of the Anglo-Indian dialect. *Dam kḥ n*, ‘to eat one’s breath’, is a Hind. idiom for ‘to be silent’. Hobson-Jobson converts this into a transitive verb, to *damkḥ o*, and both spelling and meaning being affected by English suggestions of sound, this comes in Anglo-Indian use to imply *cowing* and *silencing*.

KUZZANNA, s. Ar. – H. *kḥāna*, or *kḥāna*, ‘a treasury’. It is the usual word for the district and general treasuries in British India; and *kḥānchī* for the treasurer.

Most of *Hobson-Jobson* is about the kind of ‘mixed’ language which the English spoke in India, but this had an impact ‘at home’ as well. As we saw earlier, just one lasting effect of the history of the British Empire has been on the English language itself. Here, Yule and Burnell discuss the impact of South Asian languages on the English spoken and written by people *in England*:

Words of Indian origin have been insinuating themselves into English ever since the end of the reign of Elizabeth and the beginning of that of King James, when such terms as *calico*, *chintz*, and *gingham* had already effected a lodgement in English warehouses and shops, and were lying in wait for entrance into English literature. Such outlandish guests grew more frequent 120 years ago, when, soon after the middle of the last century, the numbers of Englishmen in the Indian services, civil and military, expanded with the great acquisition of dominion then made by the Company; and we meet them in vastly greater abundance now.

Col. Henry Yule and Arthur Coke Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson. Being a glossary of Anglo-Indian colloquial words and phrases, and of kindred terms; etymological, historical, geographical, and discursive* (London: John Murray, 1886), pp. xiii-xiv.

- What is the main point Yule and Burnell are making here?
- What *kinds* of words have been ‘insinuating themselves’ into English (what are ‘*calico*, *chintz*, and *gingham*’, do you know?)? What is their destination, from ‘English warehouses and shops’?
- What kind of imagery or language do they use to discuss the incorporation of ‘words of Indian origin’ into English, and what does it suggest about their attitudes to this process – how do they appear to *feel* about what they are describing?
- How does this compare to contemporary attitudes to language change, do you think?

Hobson-Jobson has a lot to tell us about the history of language change and language mixing – and about attitudes to language. For this reason, it continues to fascinate contemporary writers. The British Asian poet Daljit Nagra, for example, has used *Hobson-Jobson* as inspiration in his poetry, and even made a radio programme about it as well:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01kksr0>

The Indian-American novelist Amitav Ghosh has also used ‘Hobson-Jobson’ language in his historical novels about nineteenth-century India. Have a look at this short passage. Mr Doughty is an Englishman who has lived in India for a long time; Zachary is an American sailor:

Mr Doughty snorted contemptuously. ‘These days it takes no more than an acre or two for a Baboo to style himself a More-Roger. And the way this one jaws on, you’d think he’s the Padshaw of Persia. Wait till you hear the barnshoot bucking in English – like a bandar reading aloud from *The Times*.’ He chuckled gleefully, twirling the knob of his cane. ‘Now that’ll be something else to look forward to this evening, apart from the chitky – a spot of bandar-baiting.’

He paused to give Zachary a broad wink. ‘From what I hear, the Rascal’s going to be in for a samjaoing soon enough. The kubber is that his cuzzanah is running out.’

Zachary could no longer sustain the pretence of omniscience. Knitting his eyebrows, he said: ‘Cu-cuzzanah? Now there you go again, Mr Doughty: that’s another word I don’t know the meaning of.’

Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (London: John Murray, 2008), p. 50.

- Doughty appears to be speaking English, but what he says is hard for most contemporary readers to understand. Can you work out the gist of what he is talking about? If so, how?
- What do you make of the fact that Ghosh gives this kind of language to an ‘English’ character, Doughty?
- What effect does Doughty’s use of language have on Zachary?

Language mixing and the changes it produces are, of course, not relegated to the past. In *The Queen’s Hinglish*, Baljinder Mahal writes about the impact of South Asian languages on English in contemporary Britain, and records the words of what she calls ‘Hinglish’ (a contemporary mix of English and South Asian languages, predominantly Hindi). Here’s a short extract from the ‘Introduction’:

No one is claiming that all the vocabulary in this book will be casually dropped into conversation over the average white British dinner table soon, merely that these words exist, and are being used every day by a huge number of Britons and South Asians while – and this is the crucial thing – they are speaking English. As British desis increasingly make their voices heard in all areas of mainstream culture, these words, which are already become part of the overarching super-language that is World English, will become more and more familiar to an audience that even ten years ago would have been hard pressed to think of a South Asian word that didn’t stem from the time of the Raj, or from the local curry house. And the next generation of kids growing up in today’s multicultural streets will be even more receptive to these novel additions to their broadening vocabulary, especially if there’s the slightest chance that their parents won’t understand them...

Baljinder K Mahal, *The Queen’s Hinglish: How to Speak Pukka* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2006), p. vii.

- How would you summarize Mahal’s main argument here?
- What kind of attitude does she seem to have towards the processes she is writing about – how can you tell?
- How does Mahal’s tone, and perspective, compare to those of Yule and Burnell in the extract you read from *Hobson-Jobson*?
- What do you make of her suggestion that ‘the next generation of kids’ will want to use the language of *The Queen’s Hinglish* ‘if there’s the slightest chance that their parents won’t understand them....’?

WRITING EXERCISE

What is your current favourite word, or the word you use the most? Write an imaginary dictionary entry for it (for inspiration, you might like to look at the Oxford English Dictionary online: <http://www.oed.com/>). You should include: its etymology, information about where you picked it up, and an example of how you use it.

Write a poem or short story inspired by, and using, this word and its origins.