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The Many Faces of English

Sanjiva Wijesinha writes from Hong Kong

English, the official language of 44 countries, is the mother tongue of more than 350 million and a second language for millions more. Increasingly used around the world as a means of communicating between people who speak different languages, reports Gemini News Service, the widely varying uses of its words and phrases can be both confusing and embarrassing.

IN hardworking Hong Kong, hardly anybody ever complains "I have a headache." There is a simple explanation for this.

In this far eastern outpost of the British Empire, even after a hundred and fifty years of exposure to the language of Shakespeare and Milton, 'headache' is still pronounced as one might think it should be if you'd never heard it said: "HED-ETCH."

The English language, in its many regional variations, has become the *lingua franca* of the 20th century, being the official language of 44 countries and native language of some 350 million people.

While English acknowledges that 'Sor' should be spelt differently to 'Sun', and that 'No' should be distinguishable from 'Know', how can one rationalise 'The horse bolted before the stable door could be bolted' and 'I want you to book a library book for me'?

Even more confusing are the subtle nuances associated with the same word as used in various cultures. These slightly

different shades of meaning can be quite confusing — and even embarrassing.

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In the same vein, it is only a world-wise doctor who knows that an Englishman who says "I am feeling under the weather" most likely has the same symptoms as an Australian who complains "Doc, I've caught the Wog" or a New Zealander who confesses to "feeling crook".

In some parts of the world, one of the most genuine compliments you can pay someone is to say that he is simple. e.g. "Even though he is now a Member of Parliament, he hasn't lost his head — he remains the simple chap he always was."

In North America this same word 'simple' is taken literally — and calling someone a 'simple guy' is equivalent to saying, in no uncertain terms, that he is foolish! In England students sit their examinations

Down under in Australia, on the other hand, a patient who announces "I came to hospital to die" is merely announcing when he arrived — "to die" being the Antipodean way of pronouncing to-day (to distinguish it from yesterday. *Sundie, Mondie* etc.)

The English are wont to be patronising about other languages — curling their stiff upper lips at the French (who are said to convert everything from pens to mountains into sexual terms, masculinising their pens and feminising their mountains), the Germans (with their formidable composite words like *Kriegesgefangenschaftsbadigungs* *gesetz* which means "widow of a federal railway employee") and even the Chinese (whose tonal languages have to be virtually sung to make sense). If one looks at the Queen's lingo objectively, however, one can find equally illogical, complicated and confusing situations.

Perhaps the last word on this subject should go to the immortalised Scottish poet Robert Burns, who once said: "O wad some Power the giftie gie us! to see ourselves as others see us!"

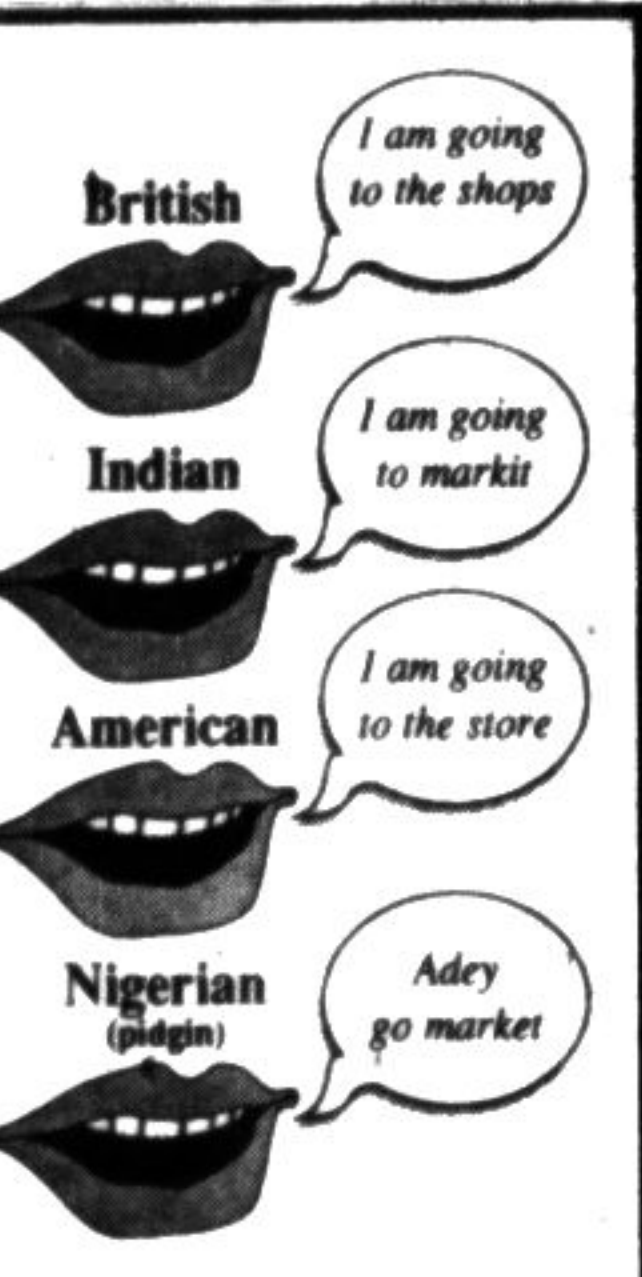
It wad frae monie a blunder free us... On second thoughts — maybe Burns was not speaking English either!

Tied to a tongue

This is my ocean, but it is speaking another language, since its accent changes around different islands. Caribbean-born Nobel laureate Derek Walcott

English has become a *lingua franca* having a greater world spread than any other language in recorded history. The varieties of English spoken by Americans, Australians, Indians, Nigerians and Chinese tend to be markedly different from one another

GEMINI NEWS SERVICE reports on why though tied to a common tongue different groups of people speak English differently



Hindlish — India's Fastest Growing Language

Atiya Singh writes from New Delhi

A new language has evolved in India. Spoken across towns and cities of the country, and among overseas Indians, a mixture of Hindi and English — called *Hindlish* — is growing fast. It owes its origin to Hindi cinema and film magazines produced in Bombay. Today the press, theatre and people of all classes, reports Gemini News Service, are enthusiastically adopting the *Hindlish* way of talking.

AN English tourist was baffled to hear two Indians talking recently in a busy Delhi bus. "I am *ekdam* sorry, *yaar*," said one to the other. The Englishman scratched his head to unravel the meaning of *ekdam* (very) and *yaar* (friend). He should not have even tried for he was not hearing his mother tongue but *Hindlish*, a mixture of Hindi and English. Spoken across towns

and cities of the country, and among many overseas Indians, *Hindlish* is India's fastest growing patois.

It owes its origin to Hindi films and film magazines produced in Bombay. India's film city. Both use *Hindlish* in their scripts and writings. With the growing popularity of Hindi films and magazines in neighbouring Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and in the Gulf region, *Hindlish* has already become a transnational dialect.

Says Nirmal Singh, a Delhi college teacher: "The day is not far off when words of *Hindlish* will find their way into the Oxford Dictionary."

Already more than 300 words of Indian origin are listed in the Oxford Dictionary. For this ever-growing tribe of Indians writing in English language has been mainly responsible.

(glitter), *Kahani* (lies), *Rokda* (money), and *Chalu Cheez* (liberated female).

Breezy, pungent and evocative as *Hindlish* is, its words have also invaded political and advertising arena. Such words as *Tamashas* (political events staged by politicians to divert attention from economic problems) and *Hargamas* (noisy political meetings), are examples or stores of words freely used by the public when they talk about politics.

And in advertising, mostly done in English to promote consumerism among India's 200 million middle class, words like *Asli* (pure) and *Nakli* (impure) are frequently used.

Hindlish expressions like "telephone hold *karu*" (hang on), "what is this *ladka* (hassle)," and "look at her *nakhra*" (pretended modesty), are commonplace to a cross-section of

Have You a 'Window' of Time, Perchance?

Nicola Cole writes from London

For a high-flying business career and a better comprehension of world events — or simply of what your neighbour is saying — it pays to know what lies in the verbal undergrowth, so to speak. Gemini News Service decodes the doublespeak.

THE legion of unmarried mothers in Britain has more than doubled to 1.3 million in 20 years — and according to the government they currently comprise "one of the biggest social problems of our day."

As Cabinet Ministers work out how to "discourage" the numbers from rising — and also how to cut the related welfare bill, now treble its 1979 total — the young mums have found a subtle new solution to an age-old dilemma.

Putting it *politely*, how to tell their boyfriends they are — or — "overdue."

It goes like this: "How many people are there in this car?" — and surely ranks among the most inventive uses to euphemism.

This style of doublespeak, or saying what you mean without exactly saying it, is flourishing again like no other time since the Victorians whispered that expectant mums were "in a certain condition" and United States militarists devise "terminate with extreme prejudice" for death raids during the Vietnam War.

Signs of the revival are emerging everywhere from airlines' use of "heavy landing" (whoops, missed the runway) to green activists who say "rainforest" for jungle and "solar-powered timepiece" instead of plain sundial.

Scientists, increasingly indignant that no one understand them, are adept at the art, with utterances like, "experiments were conducted with extreme care" (we tried not to drop things on the floor) and "of great theoretical and practical importance" (interesting to me).

Doctors and lawyers have carved their own niche in this particular hall of fame through phrases such as "chronic borborygmus" (constantly rumbling tummy) and "with respect..."

(you're talking nonsense). Yet the real pastmasters are politicians and civil servants, whose heads — and mouths — buzz with "quasi-motions," "economies with the truth" (fibs), "full, frank discussions" (we had a row) and "surgical strikes," an Israeli mind-boggler meaning attacks on Lebanese Hezbollah guerrillas.

Business executives are pretty brilliant at attempted *bogging*, too. Ambitious American firms stalk the "corporate jungle" — business districts — seeking "Cinderellas," under-performing rivals which need "re-engineering" (radical re-organisation).

This requires an injection of "pathfinders" able to "kick a ball around the park" (dream up fresh ideas).

Pathfinders for their part recruit "rainmakers" (profit-producing salespeople) to perform "turnarounds" by outselling their competitors.

Anyone disagreeing with the "mission statement" (action plan) is advised: "If you don't want toothache, stop eating my candy."

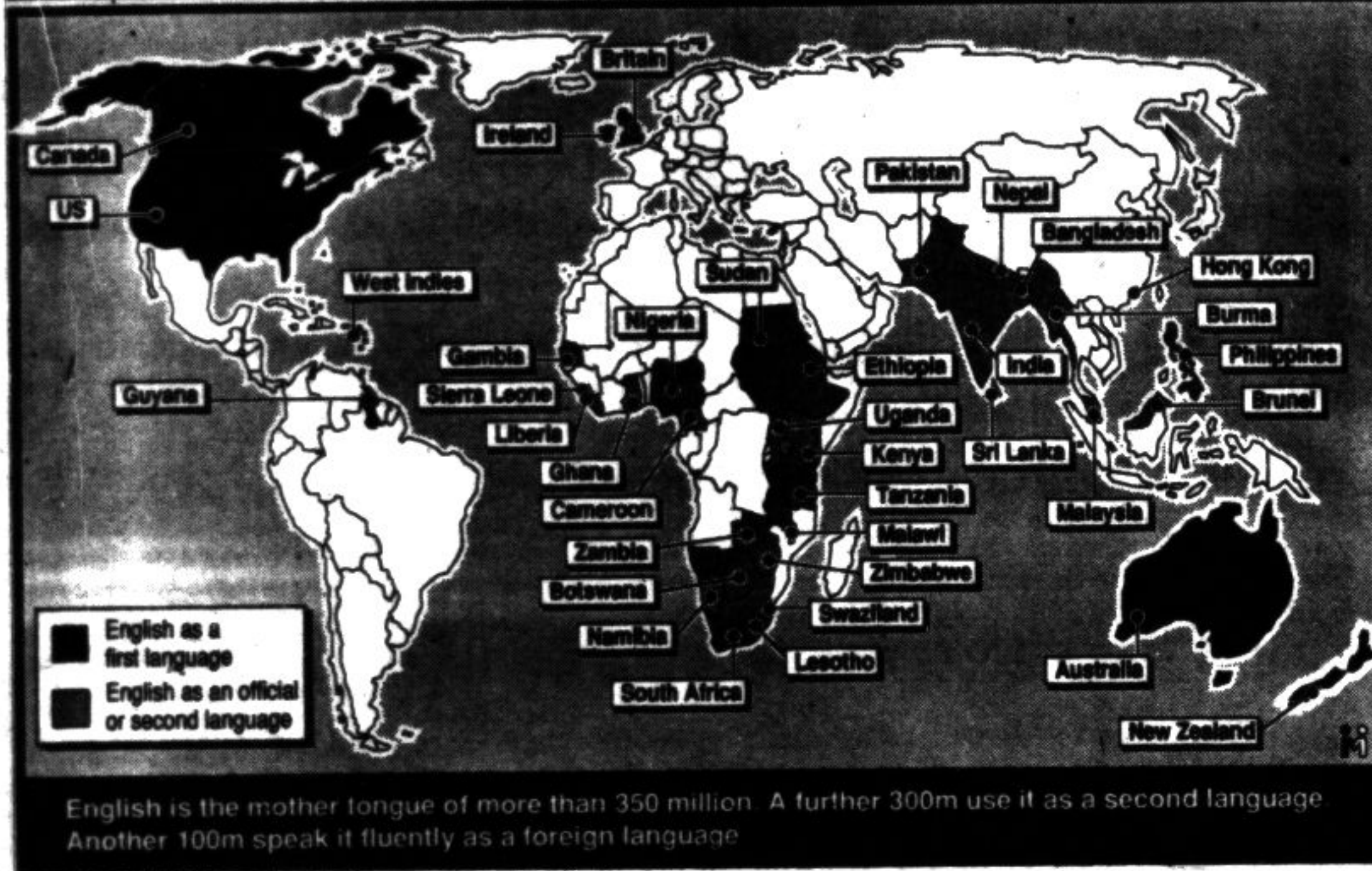
Those branded as being "past their sell-by date" (unable to stand the pace) become part of the "fat" which these days is not merely hacked away but must be "ground up and fried out," says Mike Hammer (not the famous *tec* but a newly fashionable business school guru).

Arguably the richest source of antiphrases is lonely hearts columns.

Every advertiser is perforce "adventurous," "hunky," "gorgeous" or "beautiful" — and only a cynic would wonder why such paragons need to advertise!

Close scrutiny of the racier prints tells why: it reveals a steaming midden of desires that dare not speak their name ex-

The English speaking world



English is the mother tongue of more than 350 million. A further 300m use it as a second language. Another 100m speak it fluently as a foreign language.

The variety of pronunciations and intonations employed by this vast body of speakers, however, is enough to confuse the best of linguists.

In today's world (although the French would never admit it) chances are that two people who do not understand each other's native tongues will communicate with each other using English.

And if for example a company in Argentina is trying to order goods from a German manufacturer, or a government official in Bhutan is trying to book hotel accommodation in Barcelona, the chances are that they would all be exchanging letters, phone calls of faxes in English.

It is not that English is an easy language to master — although this may not be apparent to someone who has grown up speaking one of its many dialects. Someone who has to start grappling with the intricacies of English for the first time in his or her adult life, in contrast, would find the tasks of Hercules trivial in comparison. Is there any logic, for example, behind spellings such as *colonel*, *busy*, *knife* and *gnarled* or names like *Beauchamp* and *Cholomindely*? Why is the letter cluster *ough* pronounced in eight separate ways — *though*, *through*, *thought*, *tough*, *though*, *lough*, *plough*, and *hic-*

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Confessions of a Confused 'Desi'

by Schrezad Joya Monami Latif

Don't get me wrong, I am proud to be a Bengali, to have a Bangladeshi passport. For most of us, the green passport is something we wouldn't give up, even if we became citizens of another country. But it is to our disadvantage when deciding where to live that we don't share the duality in citizenship like we do the duality in cultures which give us our unique dual personality, our dual lives.

Australian passport.

Don't get me wrong, I am proud to be a Bengali, to have a Bangladeshi passport. For most of us, the green passport is something we wouldn't give up, even if we became citizens of another country. But it is to our disadvantage when deciding where to live that we don't share the duality in citizenship like we do the duality in cultures which give us our unique dual personality, our dual lives. I can't go back to the West when I decide I want to, if I ever do. You know what they say, the grass is always greener at the other side of the septic tank (in the Bangladesh context, *paantr tank*). Yet can I survive in the East?

And now ladies and gentlemen, I present to you the ultimate dilemma for any 'confused deshi', where exactly is home? When I was growing up, I

went to an all American high school where most of the kids were like me, confused no matter where their deshi. In fact, one of my dearest friends is a NBBD, you know, Nepalese Born Confused Deshi. She's more confused than most, actually. She's born in Nepal, grown up in Thailand, educated in the States, working for an English newspaper somewhere in Asia, about to embark on an arranged marriage to someone her parents fixed up, the groom, unfortunately, is not a 'confused deshi'. (Can you imagine what this person's kids will turn out to be like?) And there are multitudes of confused deshis from all over. How about the ABCDIG? American Born Confused Deshi Imported from Gujarat! At the time I used to think, being 'confused' was wanting to go to school dances, stay out late,

and wear mini skirts but not be allowed to. Alas, but those things are nothing, tips of the enormous iceberg that most of us will have the pleasure of facing in later years.

First of all, most BBCD's speak Bangla but not fluent. As in they could not for the life of them translate words such as protectionism or echo in their mother tongue. Indeed most don't even read or write in Bangla. Hey! Give them a break! Many were never given the opportunity to learn. So, although we would not be considered native speakers of the English language by most white people, even grown people, we are. In fact, a lot of us speak better English than most so-called native English speakers. That don't matter however, you ain't white, you ain't got a passport even, and you want to be considered a native speaker? Sorry

sistah, you just don't cut it! What was it a prospective employer had told me of my status as a prospective English teacher? That I fell somewhere in the middle, between native speakers and English as a second language speakers. In the middle! That's been the story of my life so far.

Before I go any further in the lamentation of my woes however, I must explicate. Not all BBCD's are in my predicament. In fact, many have found homes in various metropolises of North America and Europe. Many still enjoy all the Western trappings of white suburbia, white picket fence and all. For me, it was one of these North American cities that helped me come to terms with my 'confused deshi' status. It took going to the West to realise how confused I was.

In high school, most of us BBCD's, I think, like any other American/European/British kids, you know, locker room scowls, note writing, posters of George Michael and Rob Lowe/the Go Go's and Christy Brinkley (O.K. so I grew up in the eighties) proms, seventeen magazine, and Miami Vice. Some of our lives were more dual than others. Some of us took classical dance or singing or *tabla* playing. Pushed by our parents, most of whom strived

cept in code — BI, S&M, Sub, Dom, VW/E and DIY, to name but a few.

With 18 wars in progress around the world, this is turning out to be anything but "the nice nineties" forecast at the decade's outset.

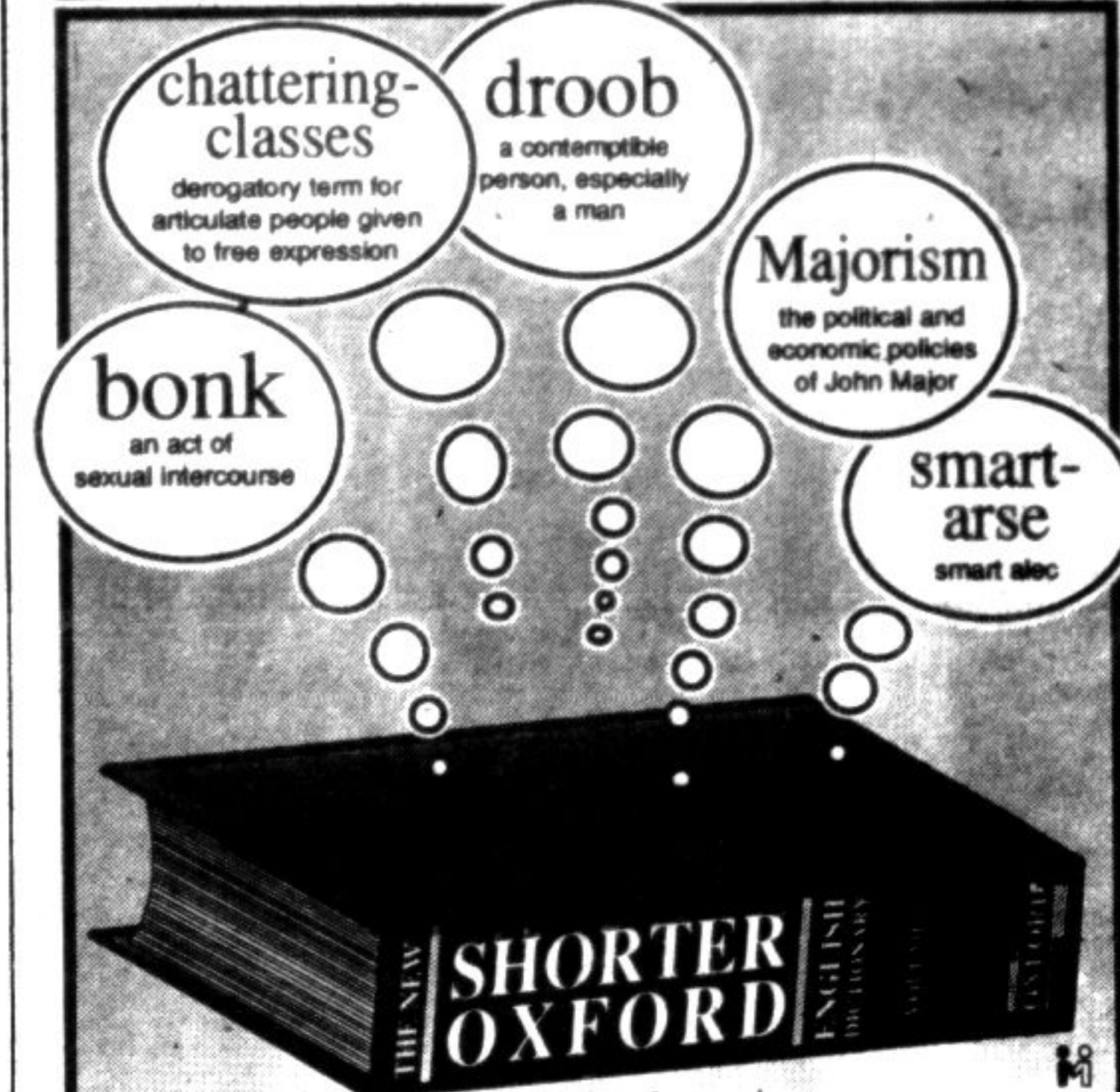
Some, however, persist in optimistic definitions, including "ethnic cleansing" (Balkanese for dispossessing and killing your enemies), "chronologically challenged" (old people) and "two cans short of a six-pack" (mentally unstable).

Yet as fast as euphemism spreads its obscuring tentacles, champions of the plan speaking mock and demystify them with translations of their own, to wit IBM — "It's Better Manually," PMT — "Post-Maastricht Tension," and UFO — "Unidentified Floating Objects" (as sighted off less salubrious holiday beaches).

And now, if you'll excuse me, I must dash; got to apply thermal energy to certain comestibles via the heat-focusing unit.

Cook the supper, for short.

Latest in lexicon



Through literal translation of many Indian expressions, novelists such as Mulk Raj Anand have enriched the English language. Anand claims to have contributed more than 50 words to the Oxford Dictionary's supplement of words from the Indian subcontinent.

In his novels Anand tried to Indianise English and has distinguished his "pigeon" English which "soared to the skies" from "pidgin" English which "wallowed in the gutter."

Says Raja Rao, another eminent Indian novelist writing in English: "As long as we are truly Indian... we shall have the English language with us and amongst us... as one of our caste, our creed, our sect and our tradition."

With the growing popularity of Indian authors such as Anita Desai, RK Narayan, CV Desani, Manohar Malgoankar, Indo-English expressions have reached an international audience.

But unlike these writers who contributed to literary English, *Hindlish* grew up in the film studios and back lanes of Bombay. It emerged as a tool of communication among the 150,000 people working in the world's biggest film industry.

Today, *Hindlish* has become a brash, young parvenu which has found acceptance among millions of Indians. One can not escape noticing it wherever one goes — in coffee houses, college campuses, buses, trains and social gatherings. What gave *Hindlish* a big push and made it a respectable slang, is its use in English-language film magazines.

What Dr Samuel Johnson did to English language, Stardust, a Bombay film magazine, has done to popularise and promote *Hindlish*. In her column Neeta's Natter, the magazine's most popular writer Neeta keeps on adding new words into the *Hindlish* lexicon. These include: *Bak-bak* (chatter), *Chamak-dhamak*

public, and words such as *Chamcha* (flatterer) are almost considered part of standard English in India and are widely used by the press.

Linguists find nothing abnormal in the mixing of Hindi and English, arguing that both belong to the Indo-European language family. In fact, as long lost cousins, they have remained in touch for centuries via their Arabic and Greek connections. That explains why words like *camphor*, *musk* and *opal* became part of English language.

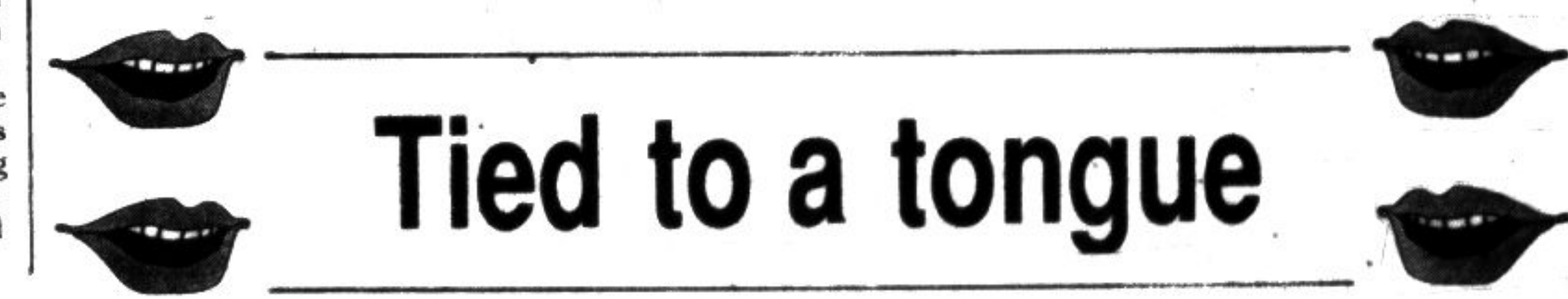
But the greatest interchange of words between the two languages began during the British colonial rule when words like *shikari*, *ghee*, *khaki*, *chit*, *pundit*, *nawab*, and *maharaja* became part of standard English. And now *Hindlish* is continuing the tradition, albeit in the reverse, by Indianising English.

The biggest gainers are Bombay's theatres which have been staging English language plays for decades. But with dwindling audiences the theatre owners decided to switch over to English-made-easy plays scripted with a liberal sprinkling of polyglot city patois.

Now fans are again flocking to the theatre for an "ekdam entertaining comedy nite," or "swinging *tamashas*." Says drama critic Rahul Goswami: "Today, it's the pop-commercial production, but this is the one raking the *rokda*."

Adds Bharat Dabholkar, a script writer in Bombay: "In the final analysis, it's communication. Indians speak English with a vernacular lilt... So, I use the same technique with the script."

As the contribution of *Hindlish* to the timber and tone of Indo-English writings grows, so is acceptance of its words and expressions into the ever-growing English lexicon. "Only then," says film critic SD Sharma, tongue in cheek, "we'll have some maza (fun)"



Tied to a tongue

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