

Toasted English

R. K. NARAYAN

About the Author

Born in Madras, R. K. NARAYAN (1906–2001) is one of the best of the first generation of Indian novelists in English, the other two being Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. R. K. Narayan has published more than ten novels and short stories. His works have been translated into several Indian and European languages. Among Narayan's most famous novels is *The Guide*, which has been filmed. Narayan created an imaginary town named Malgudi, which forms the setting of most of his work.

Narayan is well-known for the direct simplicity of his language, his realistic settings and even more realistic characters. He was sometimes compared to the American writer Faulkner for his compassionate humanism and celebration of ordinary life. 'Toasted English' is a half-humorous, half-serious essay about how the same language—English—differs from one country to another.

About the Essay

In 'Toasted English', R. K. Narayan shows the difference between American and British English in his typical humorous style with brilliant examples.

The essayist states that like Indians, Americans too, retained the English language and let it flourish even though they drove the British out. The Americans simplified the usage of English by doing away with the passive voice. For instance, in place of 'Trespassing Prohibited,' the notice reads 'Newly planted, don't walk.' American English also includes words such as 'OK,' 'check' and 'fabulous'—words which can be used anywhere and in any context.

He further discusses 'the bazaar status' of English in London. In day-to-day activities in London, English is used in a fine, polished way. The writer illustrates this by discussing the expressions (as they are used in practical life) and what they connote. For instance 'Can I help you?' actually implies 'Have you any business here, if so state it.'

Finally he concludes by advocating a 'Bharat brand of English' in post independence India. The writer feels that, like American English, Indian English should have its own flavor and idiom. There should be a Swadeshi stamp about it.

Toasted English

In the American restaurants they call for 'Toasted English,' referring to English muffins which, though being made in America, now retain 'English' as a sort of concession to their origin. The same may be said of their language too. Americans too went through a phase of throwing out the British but retaining their language and letting it flourish on American soil; the resultant language is somewhat different from its British counterpart; it may be said to have gone through a process of toasting. One noticeable result of this toasting is that much of the formalism surrounding the use of English has been abandoned.

In America, they have freed the language from the stifling tyranny of the Passive Voice. Where we should say ceremoniously 'Trespassing prohibited,' their signboards, as I noticed in the parks of Berkeley, merely say, 'Newly planted, don't walk.' 'Absolutely No Parking' leaves no room for speculation, and no motorist need spend too much peering out and studying the notice. In a similar situation our authorities are likely to plant a twenty-line inscription on the landscape to say, 'Under Municipal Act so and so of the Motorist Vehicles Act, etc. etc.' I saw on many American office doors just 'Do not Enter.' The traffic signs

at pedestrian crossings never mince words; they just say 'Go', or 'Wait'. In a Hollywood studio I was rather startled to read, 'Mark Stevens—Keep out'. Mark Stevens is a busy television personality who does not like to be disturbed by visitors. Incidentally, it left me wondering why, if Mr Stevens does not like interruption, he should announce his name at all on the door! But it is one of the minor mysteries that make travel through that country so engrossing.

The 'toasting' of English has been achieved through other means also. Americans have evolved certain basic key words which may be used anywhere, anyhow, words which have universal multipurpose use. I may make my point clear if I mention the example of the word 'Check' which may safely be labelled the American National Expression. While British usage confines it to its bare dictionary definitions, the American uses it anywhere, this expression being so devised that one may blindly utter it and still find that it is appropriate for the occasion. 'I'll check' means 'I'll find out, investigate, examine, scrutinize, verify, or probe.' 'Your check' means your ticket, token or whatever you may have to produce. 'Check room' is where you leave your possessions for a while. 'Check girl' is one who takes care of your coat, umbrella, or anything else you may leave in custody. 'Check in' and 'Check out' (at first I head it as 'Chuck out' and felt rather disturbed) refer to one's arrival in a hotel and departure therefrom. And there are scores of other incidental uses for the word. If you are ever hard-up for a noun or a verb you may safely utter the word 'check' and feel confident that it will fit in. 'Fabulous' is another word that is used in that country freely, without much premeditation. Of course everyone knows what fabulous means, but the American usage has enlarged its sense. I found a lady in Wisconsin declare 'Oh, those cats of mine are fabulous,' meaning that they were eccentric. 'Oh, so and so, he is fabulous!' may mean anything from a sincere compliment to an insinuation that so and so displays a mild form of charming lunacy.

'OK' is another well-known example. It is the easiest sound that ever emanated from the human vocal cords. Everyone knows how comprehensive its sense can be. 'Okay' is a self-sufficient word which needs no suffix to indicate any special respect for the listener; it can stand by itself without a 'Sir' to conclude the sentence. In this

respect it is like 'Yeah' which seals off a sentence without further ado. 'Yes sir' or 'Yes, darling' is conceivable but 'Yeah sir', or 'Yeah darling' is unthinkable. 'Yeah' is uttered in a short base-of-the-tongue grunt, which almost snaps off any further continuation of a sentence. 'Yes' involves time as the sibilant could be prolonged.

The refinements of usage in countries where English has a bazaar status are worth a study. On a London bus you will never hear the conductor cry, 'Ticket, Ticket'. He approaches the passenger and says 'Thank you', and on receiving the fare says again, 'Thank you, sir'. I found out that one could calculate the number of passengers in a bus by halving the total number of 'Thanks' heard. In any Western country if a receptionist asks, 'Can I help you?' it really means 'Have you any business here, if so state it.' Or it may mean 'Evidently you have wandered off into a wrong place, go away.' A man who wants to pass you always says 'Excuse me', while he may with all justice burst out, 'What do you mean by standing there gaping at the world while you block everybody's passage? Stand aside, man!' When you send your card in, the busy man's secretary appears and whispers in your ear, 'Would you like to wait?' Though the tone is one of consultation, you have really no choice in the matter. The thing to do is not to answer the question but say 'Thanks' and look for a comfortable seat in the waiting room, although you may feel like saying, 'No, I wouldn't like to wait. I have other things to do.'

The time has come for us to consider seriously the question of a Bharat brand of English. So far English has had a comparatively confined existence in our country, chiefly in the halls of learning, justice or administration. Now the time is ripe for it to come to the dusty street, market place, and under the banyan tree. English must adopt the complexion of our life and assimilate its idiom. I am not suggesting here a mongrelisation of the language. I am not recommending that we should go back to the days when we heard, particularly in the railway, 'Wer U goin', man?' Bharat English will respect the rule of law and maintain the dignity of grammar, but still have a Swadeshi stamp about it unmistakably, like the Madras handloom check shirt or the Thirupathi doll.