'RE-SEARCHING' RESEARCH TOPICS

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ABSTRACT

There are many academics who find research in English in India to be repetitive, and advocate taking up fresh topics that would lead to new findings and hence to better understanding of theory and practice. In fact, many go as far as to say that much of what is passed off as research does not qualify as such because it is neither a systematic investigation nor reaches any new conclusions. This paper focuses on new avenues that can be explored in the field of English.

KEYWORDS: *systematic investigation , theory and practice.*

INTRODUCTION:

The Oxford English Dictionary defines research as 'the systematic investigation into and study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions'. The present author was reminded of this definition when a thesis was sent to her for evaluation and she found to her great surprise that not only was the thesis based on only two autobiographical books by one single author (with no review of other literature), but the writer of the thesis also time and again called the books 'novels'. The thesis spoke of Feminism as apparent in the books taken up for study, but did not try to categorise it into any of the existing theories of Feminism. Nor did it attempt a fresh look at Feminism based on the content of the books. At best, it sounded like a rant about women having to carry the entire burden of household duties despite becoming significant breadwinners in recent years, and that women face oppression in every sphere of life. While both are critical issues of great import, there was nothing in the thesis that has not been said before. The fact that it had reached an evaluator entails that the thesis had gone through due process and that the synopsis was whetted by the Research Review Committee while the thesis itself was cleared by the research guide. And yet, the thesis was neither a systematic investigation (or the writer would not have called the autobiographical books 'novels') nor did it reach any new conclusions. It triggered a curiosity in the present writer and she attempted to find out how much of research done in India in the field of English language and literature is indeed a fresh perspective. The results were disappointing.

As far back as 1964, V.K. Gokak opined that

> *Research students in our universities frequently spend their years in preparing theses which are hardly anything than a collection of available critical dicta and a contribution not to knowledge, but to a whole heap of typescripts piled up in a university library.*[1]

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[1] Gokak, V.K. (1964). English in India: Its Present and Future. Mumbai Asia Publishing House.

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He suggested a wide variety of topics that were virgin territory as far as research was concerned and held much potential. More recently, Tasildar laments the repetitive work done in the name of research and says that the titles of theses are so cliched that they themselves can be a topic of a minor research project. He points out that the lack of research in critical theory is a big vacuum in Indian writings. There are similarly many more academics who find research in English in India to be repetitive and advocate taking up fresh topics that would lead to new findings and hence to better understanding of theory and practice. In fact, many go as far as to say that much of what is passed off as research does not qualify as such because it is neither a systematic investigation nor reaches any new conclusions. While that is the subject matter of another paper written by the present author, this paper focuses on new avenues that can be explored in the field of English.

Two Main Kinds of Research in English:

The two main fields of research in English are Linguistic research and Literary research. Both are distinct in their style and both have their own uses. Both are critical to the understanding of English as a language. Although the two disciplines are so different in nature that they warrant separate

Linguistic Research	Literary Research
It studies an abstract system of symbols and meanings governed by grammatical rules	It studies written works, especially those considered to be of superior or lasting artistic value
Both spoken and written language can be studied	Mostly only written forms are studied
The origin of language is communication	The origin of literature is language
Language studies entail the study of rules and structure. It is more technical than literature	Literature studies entail the study of the work and styles of different authors. It is a more aesthetic subject
It helps understand usage of language	It helps understand and appreciate aesthetics of language
It helps understand factors that influence usage	It helps identify the manifestation of that influence
It is a tool to study societal influences on language	It is a tool to study the reflection of society
It helps in language acquisition	It helps in language appreciation

departments within any university, they both fall under the umbrella term of English studies. In India, Literature was a more popular branch of studies as compared to Linguistics for a very long time, but the study of English as a second language has come up as a major area of research since the Indian economy opened up and triggered a massive demand for English. This prompted a surge in Linguistic research. Following are the distinctions between these two branches of study that set them apart:

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The specific utility of these subjects is also marked by significant differences. These distinctions notwithstanding, a researcher would do well to remember that linguistics and literature studies are not watertight compartments. There is a lot of fluidity between the two and looking at them as complimentary to each other is a more holistic approach. In the words of Russian linguist and literary theorist Roman Jakobson,

> *A linguist deaf to the poetic functions of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistics are equally flagrant anachronisms.[2]*

So, not only is it important to recognise the differences between the two disciplines, but also to recognise their interplay. It is possible, even recommended, that two or more of these streams of thought are mixed to identify more textured problems. Once we do that, it is easy to formulate questions that will lead to good, meaningful research. It will ensure that our doctoral theses become more weighty and noteworthy.

The following pages will list out some interesting areas that can be examined. They will include not only time tested trends, but also the most recent ones that have emerged as a result of the outreach of technology. There will also be examples of such research wherever available. Some of these areas are very new and it may be difficult to locate examples of research papers on them. However, far from being discouraging, this should be looked upon as an opportunity. Research done in a virgin area is always exciting and, if done diligently, can indeed be pathbreaking.

Possible areas of Research:

Research specific to India: Given the diversity in languages and cultures in India coupled with a large English speaking population, the following areas of research will be very relevant to India. In addition, there will be no dearth of material because of the same conditions.

- *Stylistic Analysis:* An analysis of various language styles done in order to dig out meaning from texts is called stylistic analysis. A comparison of these styles is also possible. A good example of this kind of research is *A Stylistic Analysis of Two Selected Poems* by Eman Adil Jaafar.

- *Translation Studies:* Translation studies are that branch of study that deal with theory, description and application of translation. However, research in this field involves much more than just an interlingual transfer. In fact, such a transfer is often very unsatisfying because language is so much more than just words. There are things like subtext, cultural communication, gender bias, historical influence, philosophy, semantics that make a language layered and complex. A good translation must address all this. A paper on translation studies that is inclusive of several disciplines at the same time is *The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology* by Talal Asad.

- *Contrastive Analysis:* When two languages are examined side by side with the aim of studying their structural similarities and differences, this is called Contrastive Analysis. Hanif Nurcholish Adiantika's *Contrastive Analysis between Indonesian and English Declarative Sentences* is an example of one such study.

- *Learner Analysis*: This is a study of errors that appear in the learner language. It also explores the reasons for those errors and examines if they are systematic. This helps in developing better learning methodologies and tools. *Error Analysis in English as a Second Language Students' Writing*, a paper jointly written by Mahrukh Shakir, Alia Rasool and Marina Khan is a good example of such research.

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[2] **Jakobson R (1960***) Closing statement: Linguistics and Poetics. In: Sebeok T (ed.) Style in Language.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 350-377.

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Media and its Influence on Linguistic Choices: In the last three decades, media of communication have seen an exponential rise until they have now become all pervasive. We have access to millions of articles, sound clips, and videos that have been written by people all over the world. Naturally, their styles are just as varied. This influences linguistic choices which can make for very interesting studies.

- ***News Media:*** News media tends towards hyperbole, use of strong language, and sometimes even inciting language. When spoken, high pitches are fairly common. In recent years, there has also been a tendency towards formation of sentences which, though correct, are a result of eccentric use of grammar. A research article called *Mass Media and its Effect on Language Maintenance and Acquisition* by Teddy Kokoros is a good start.

- ***Social Media:*** The abbreviations of spellings to include symbols and numbers is also a recent development that has come about from the need to be brief while texting. Words like gr8, f2f, b4 and abbreviations like tysm, lol, imho have become common. Today, a sentence like *Tysm 4 d gr8 f2f meet!* may be annoying for traditional users of English, but it is perfectly acceptable for the younger generation. A research paper by Al Showly called *Texting Abbreviations and Language Learning* explains this very nicely.

- ***Move towards more casual language:*** The formal language of written communication has taken a far more relaxed turn with bosses being called by first names and open door policies. While there are several reasons for this, one of the reasons certainly is exposure to other, more informal cultures through media. Sentences like 'It is my most humble supplication that….,' or 'It has fallen upon me to most unfortunately report that….' or 'I would be highly obliged if you kindly consider….', which were the hallmark of formal, polite writing are all but absent. Letters, or rather emails, even when written to higher ups are alright to begin with just a 'Hi' these days.

Linguistic/Regional Hegemony: English is today a global language and people with command over the language are accorded higher respect than others. They score even above multilingual people. This is known as Linguistic Hegemony. Various languages have enjoyed this status at various points of time. Sanskrit in ancient India, German in Europe before WWI, French even today in fashionable circles, and Latin during the Roman Era were all considered the language of the sophisticated. Even dialects are subject to such arbitrary judgment. The Marathi of Pune is considered 'pure' as opposed to other dialects of Marathi spoken in other regions of Maharashtra. The same was true of the Urdu of Lucknow during the sunset of the Mughal Era and the RP version of English following the expansion of the British empire. This is Dialectical Hegemony. Exploring the politics behind hegemony of language and dialect is also a fruitful exercise. There are three primary reasons why this hegemony comes about.

- ***Scholarship in the Courts:*** Scholarship needs patronage, and in earlier days this was only available at royal courts. This caused a concentration of men of letters to gather round the seat of power. The benefactors of this patronage would naturally be inclined to promote the language and manners of the rulers, thus perpetuating its particular dialect. It is useful to remember that no language or dialect is more correct or more pure than another. Even linguistic supremacy is derived from political power.

- ***Being fashionable or politically correct:*** Whether language or dialect, historically it has come about that reigning culture is the biggest influencer. The language spoken by them, and specifically the dialect spoken by them is the one that finds favour with those in their inner circle. In part this is to curry favour with the rulers by being flattering towards them, and part of it comes from wanting to sound fashionable or to sound like they 'belong'.

- ***Need to retain a superior status:*** Nations or cultures already in a position of power will do several things that help maintain the status quo. Using language or its dialect and pronunciation to assert domination is one of those tools. Paul Kroskrity's paper titled *Covert Linguistic Racisms and the (Re-)Production of White Supremacy* discusses this in great detail.

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Gender and Speech Patterns: There is a distinct relation between what gender a person belongs to and the way they use language. This has been one of the ideas put forward within the larger discourse in Feminism, but that is not the only gender being discussed anymore. The struggle for more freedom and visibility by the LGBTQ+ community has also made the world more aware of their speech patterns. Here are some of the topics that can make for some interesting research:

- *Upward inflection:* When making a statement or articulating an affirmative sentence, women are twice as likely as men to give the sentence an upward inflection and drawing out the last word causing it to sound like an unsure thing. This causes them to seem insecure and less confident. For example, a sentence like 'I was at the mall with my friends.' is pronounced to sound like a question - 'I was at the mall with my friends...?' This is called 'uptalk' in linguistic parlance and is neatly examined in Paul Warren's *Uptalk - The Phenomenon of Rising Intonation*.

- *Use of filler phrases:* The use of filler phrases like 'I mean, I think, I guess, I suppose, umm, so like, you know' etc. is also more common among women than men. When these are used excessively, the women come across as less assertive. This comes as no surprise as women constantly have to tone themselves down in order to not seem overly domineering as it is looked upon as an undesirable trait in women. This phenomenon along with its relation to age is discussed in a paper jointly written by Charlyn Laserna, Yi-Tai Seih, and James W. Pennebaker and titled *Um . . . Who Like Says You Know: Filler Word Use as a Function of Age, Gender, and Personality.*

- *Average Number of Words Spoken:* Research has conclusively proven that women get fewer opportunities to talk in a mixed gathering and the average number of words they get to speak is far lesser than their male counterpart, particularly in a professional setting. Maryam Pakzadin and Arezoo Ashoori Tootkaboni have elaborated upon this in their paper titled *The Role of Gender in Conversational Dominance: A Study of EFL Learners*.

- *Same Language, different effect:* In a workplace, women in a position of authority find it harder to exercise that authority than men. Women with a no nonsense approach, or those who drive their team hard to perform are often perceived as domineering or bossy. Men displaying the same traits are termed professional and efficient. Studies have shown that men and women, using the same language and the same words have different effects on their employees, colleagues and subordinates.Cathy Caprino brings this out in her article *Gender Bias at Work: Why Men Call Women Hysterical and Try to Silence Them.*

- *LGBTQ+ Vocabulary and Slang:* The exact percentage of LGBTQ people among the population is under debate. However, even the smallest projection at 3.1% makes it a hefty number. Given that this community has historically faced repression and has only recently found a voice, it is no surprise that a new vocabulary was needed to address the phenomenon. The Bowling Green State University has come out with a glossary of such terms. Also, when people feel a gender disconnect with the bodies they are born in, they often override the disconnect by bringing their verbal and non verbal language in sync with their feelings. This causes them to talk differently from people identifying with the gender assigned to them at birth. The LGBTQ+ community also uses slang words that are hardly known to the average speaker of English. In fact, there are a number of sites that give a list of such slang words for those unfamiliar with them.

Endangered Languages/Dialects: Just like a language is born, becomes mature and grows old, it also dies. Latin and Sanskrit are examples of dead languages. (It is often argued that Sanskrit is not a dead language and that it is very much in use, but it must be remembered that it is not anyone's mother tongue. If it is being spoken today, it is only because it is being revived.) Other languages like Hawaiian Olelo and Hebrew came back from the brink of extinction. Even English would have been an obscure

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and possibly dead language if it had not caught popular imagination courtesy Chaucer. The advantages of studying such languages are:

• Understanding cultures

• Understanding conventional wisdom

• Possibility of discovering new scientific facts/data

• Discovering unique words that can be borrowed to make your language richer (wanderlust (German), petrichor (English), Katarvel (Marathi))

Such a study can be undertaken by:

• Studying phrases, idioms, and proverbs

• Studying folklore, folksongs

• Studying written work, if any

Historical Linguistics: Historical linguistics studies how languages change over time. It includes the change in meaning of words, syntactical formations as also the changes in pronunciation over the ages. This is also known as Diachronic Linguistics. Under this head, here are some examples of the types of studies that may be undertaken:

• Tracing back linguistics forms and studying their evolution

• Studying scripts of different languages and the link between their form and pronunciation

• Deciphering old scripts and uncovering their meaning

• Studying similar sounding words with identical meaning in different languages to find connections, e.g. numbers

• Studying grammatical patterns to trace genealogy/history of languages

• Studying migration across continents, topographies, regions through the study of similarity of language

Felicity Meakins' paper on the development of Creole languages called *The Third Space in the Fourth Column: Revisiting the Role of Agency in the Formation of Creoles* is an example of a study in Historical Linguistics.

Translation Studies: The diversity of languages in India is a blessing for research. Most Indians are at least bilingual and many are even fluent in 3-4 languages. This can be used to great advantage in studying texts in English and their translation in a language we know well. Topics under this head could be:

• Development of translation theories

• Studying methods of translation: Word-for-word Translation, Literal Translation, Semantic Translation, Adaptation Style of Translation, Free Translation

• Studying two different translations in the same language to explore the method used and identifying the more effective one in that particular case

• Studying a text translated into two different languages and making a comparative analysis

• Developing tools for target language acquisition

Novriyanto Napu and Rifal Hasan have written a paper titled *Translation Problems Analysis of Students' Academic Essay* wherein they detail the problem with starting a translation without reading the full text first. This is a good example of how our own classroom experiences can be a fertile ground for identifying research problems.

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Interdisciplinary Research: This is a relatively new trend, but it has opened up a whole range of topics that can be studied and can yield practically implementable results. The study of English can be paired with a number of disciplines and this allows us to look at any problem from entirely different and heretofore unexplored angles. Ideally this kind of research should be done in a collaborative manner to include someone who is an expert on the discipline with which the study of English is being paired. Some examples can be:

- ***How the multilingual mind works:*** As already mentioned, most Indians are bi- or multilingual. This makes it easy to select a wider sample. A collaborative paper by Eve Rigby, Jungna Kim and Loraine K. Obler on *Multilingualism and the Brain* illustrates how Neuroscience can be clubbed with language acquisition and usage.

- ***How Dyslexics perceive language and how they can be helped:*** Many students who were labeled poor learners or inattentive are today getting diagnosed with conditions like ADHD, Autism, or Dyslexia. Among these, dyslexics are people who have trouble distinguishing between phonemes and the symbol that represents them. In a detailed essay, *Dyslexia and Foreign Language Learning*, Lisa Knudsen outlines the struggle of these students and how they can be helped to cope. She combines the study of learning disabilities with language learning.

- ***How individual psychology aids or hinders language acquisition:*** Lack of confidence or motivation can mar language acquisition. Similarly, it may also cause language or culture or identity shock. These are psychological factors, and depending on the personality of the learner, it may decide if they will be quick or slow learners. A paper titled *A Research into the Influence of Individual Differences own the Effect of Second Language Acquisition - A Case Study* by Zi Yu, Yuyang Fu, and Wei Gou is an extensive study on the topic involving 400 university students. This paper combines Psychology and language learning.

- ***Impact of Predictive Text and Autocorrect on learner performance:*** Predictive texting and autocorrect have come to the rescue of many new learners and helped them write more accurately and effectively. But is it really helping or is it actually counterproductive? If it is helpful, who is it helping in particular? If it is a hindrance, what are the specific hurdles? These questions are examined in Kenneth Charles' thesis on *Impacts of Predictive Texting on Writing Content.*

CONCLUSION:
Erudite linguist Noam Chomsky said,

> *A language is not just words. It's a culture, a tradition, a unification of a community, a whole history that creates what a community is. It's all embodied in a language.*[3]

A language is a means of communication. Its literature is a reflection of its culture and tradition. It is also a receptacle of the history of its speakers. When we ignore all this multifaceted nature of language, our research becomes linear and flat. If more Indian researchers would understand the true purpose behind research, it would greatly benefit the learner of English as a second language. It would also showcase our linguistic, cultural, sociological, and political history in a more rounded and wholesome manner. It is necessary for the researcher of English to look beyond the immediate and make a real effort at 're-searching' for topics truly worthy of attention. Only then can we hope to churn out meaningful research.

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