

Toasted English

In 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 the Americans' language too. They 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 would say ceremoniously 'Trespassing Prohibited', their signboards, as I noticed in the parks of Berkeley, merely say 'Newly Planted, Don't Walk.' Or 'Absolutely No Parking' leaves no room for speculation, and no motorist need spend too much time 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 this area has been reserved, etc., etc., and any vehicle stationed thereon will be deemed to have contravened sub-section so and so of the Motor 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 did not like interruptions, he announced 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 keywords which may be used anywhere, anyhow, words which have universal, multi-purpose 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 the

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 possession 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 heard 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 American usage has enlarged its sense. I heard 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.

'O.K.' or okay is another well-known example. It is the easiest sound that ever emanated from the human vocal chords. 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' are conceivable but 'Yeah sir', or 'Yeah darling,' is unthinkable. 'Yeah' is uttered in a short base-of-the-tongue grunt, which almost snaps 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. As I've said in my essay on 'English in India' 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 mongrelization of the language. I am not recommending that we should go back to the days when we heard, particularly in the railways, '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 Tirupati doll. How it can be achieved is a question for practical men to tackle.