

MY TRYST WITH ENGLISH IN MY PROFESSION

Prasanta Kumar Basu

(B. Tech. 1965)

Introduction: English as only language in journals

In which language did Satyendra Nath Bose publish his first paper on derivation of Planck's law? No prize for the answer, not even a piece of chocolate which is given to a successful contestant in Radio Physics and Electronics (RPE) Reunion quiz contest. Everybody knows that it was in German, thanks to Einstein, who at the behest of Bose translated the original paper written in English and added a footnote. That was 1924. At that time German scientists and a few others from adjacent countries preferred to write scientific papers in German language. French scientists wrote in French, Italians in their own language, Japanese in Japanese language, and so and so forth. Of course, Britishers, scientists from colonies of Britain and Americans wrote in English.

How long was this practice followed? I cannot specify. But when I joined research in 1967, I found multilingual papers in journals published from Germany and France. Russians including inhabitants in the east European countries published in Russian journals. However, as Russia beat the USA in first launching satellite sputnik and afterwards sent the dog Lyka in a spacecraft, American Institute of Physics (AIP) started publishing translated versions of various Russian journals. I list some of them : Soviet journal Solid State Physics, Semiconductors, USPEKHI and a few such.

Almost all journals, at least the ones I and my other colleagues in RPE used to browse and to which they published, started using English and only English. It may be around 1975, if not earlier. Very slowly, all the international conferences urged the participants to reckon that English will be the official language. European professors preferred to have English speaking students and postdoctoral visitors in their group so that their students can be more fluent in spoken English. I knew this from the professors in Belgium and Austria.

My initial training in English

I, and to the best of my knowledge, most of my friends in B.Sc and in PG courses, studied in Bengali medium schools. That was the trend at that time. In fact, in our time, some percentage was deducted from the marks obtained by ICSE board students while preparing the list of admission into CU colleges.

My struggle with English began when I joined research after doing my M.Tech in RPE. While pursuing my PG studies, I realized the advantages of speaking fluent English. For that purpose, I chose to read plays by stalwarts like George Bernard Shaw or others. Classic! But I had no other option. During the initial phase of research, we had to read scientific papers in journals, and I learnt the method of writing technical papers. However, problems arose when I need to write progress reports for my research activities. I recall one incident. I showed Prof. Biswa Ranjan Nag (BRN), my supervisor, the draft report and he okayed. I got it typed and placed it in his table for his signature. He called me after some time and said there were a lot of mistakes, both grammatical and spelling. I meekly asked *where? Find out and submit the corrected one for my signature* was his reply. I submitted the revised one, corrected as far as practicable with trembling hands. It was approved, somewhat reluctantly, as perhaps BRN did not want to waste time in further improvement.

BRN was not much pleased about my English. He asked me about my schooling and knowing that I passed from a mofussil school, he commented that students from mofussil schools were usually weak in English.

Something funny happened a few months, almost more than a year later. I wrote my first paper with BRN and Hrishikesh Paria. Naturally, the final submitted paper was the outcome of a few earlier drafts and was critically read by BRN. The comments came from British J Appl Phys (IOP journal: now known as J Phys D: Appl Phys). The reviewer politely (mercilessly in my opinion) suggested to reduce drastically the experimental part. But the comment that *English needs to be improved, in particular, the authors' use/omission of articles (a, an, the) needs careful scrutiny*. Now, it's the time of embarrassment of my mentor! He was also a product of a very remote school. To be frank, I still feel shaky at this age about proper use of articles.

Useful lessons from J M Ziman

I recall a talk given by Prof. J M Ziman, a noted theoretical physicist from Bristol, at Saha Institute of Nuclear Physics, on writing scientific papers sometime around 1968-69. It was a wonderful talk. The particular lesson I learnt, still vivid in my memory, is the use of *we* instead of *I*, even though *I* am the single author. This was the suggestion to him by a referee in Phys Rev Letters (PRL). Also, a polite sentence like, *he did not, however, consider such and such modification or, his work requires support from improved theory*, is sufficient to convey the message that the work is questionable.

I later encountered frequent use of *I* instead of *we*, both in the abstract and text in many papers even in PRL.

As a lecturer in RPE

I joined RPE department as a Lecturer on September 09, 1971. Initially I did not have any teaching duty, but other assignments started pouring in slowly. These needed writing letters. Almost a month later, Prof. Arun K Choudhury (AKC), the Chairman of RPE Association made me the Secretary of AGM of RPE Association replacing the defunct secretary who did not convene AGM cum Reunion for long 3 years! The job required, apart from many other tasks, writing letters to ex-students, advertisers etc., etc. These involved different kind of English writing. Immediately after reunion held at the end of February 1972, students led by Susanta, Pradip, Soumya et al forced me to be the teacher-in-charge for their educational tour. I requested Debidas, who was then at Jadavpur, to accompany me and he impersonated a student, who could not join after being included in the list. Again started letter writing, mostly on behalf of the HOD. Who else other than Prof. Bhar was in the chair! I once showed him a draft version. He read it thoroughly and said *সুন্দর হয়েছে*। His comments gave me a lot of encouragement and confidence overcoming my inferiority complex!

During the tour, English was of course the language for conversation. But no serious problem related to language deficiency arose.

English in foreign countries: Belgium and Austria

After my return from the tour, I got an offer for postdoc fellowship from Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium, for which I applied a year earlier. Question arose: can I get leave just after 1 year of service. Thanks to Prof. Bhar, special leave for one year was sanctioned and thus I arrived in Belgium in October 1972.

Fortunately, almost all people in Belgium, leave alone faculties and researchers in the University and students in students hall, where I was placed, spoke English. I had a good chance of improving my spoken English during the stay. But, one problem was there; its due to my speaking rapidly when I was excited or overjoyed. My student friends shouted "hey! Speak slowly". I controlled myself, but to be frank this is my own problem for which I pay the price even now. But that has nothing to do with English. I faced the same comments while giving a talk in Vienna. *Please speak slowly*; but I forgot!

The lesson I learnt from this 1 year trip is that you try to talk at a reduced pace during lectures following British accent. I don't know how far I could follow this. Nripen da

(Prof. N Purkait) tore me apart by using the words চিবিয়ে চিবিয়ে ইংরিজী বলা। However, I found that my technique worked well.

Back to RPE

My primary jobs after 1973 after my European sojourn were teaching and escorting. Debasish Chattopadhyay went to Norway. Who will teach his subject Electronic Design and Drawing? Why PKB? H Paria went to UK. PKB was to teach transistor circuits as his replacement. Subir Bandyopadhyay went abroad. Who will teach pulse and digital circuits? PKB of course. All courses to be started in one month's or even less than a month notice! Tragedy is that I could not continue after their return. I played as 12th man promoted into main team due to injury of a teammate a few more times in later years.

Add to this my other regular job. K S Balain from CEERI visited RPE. I had to give him company from 10 AM to 6 PM when he left. L S Kothari wished to visit Kali Temple and then go to IACS. Who else but PKB to spend the whole day? A US Visitor (forgot his name) was to come to airport around 9-9.30 PM. I had to receive him, and put him in CU's guest house at Ballygunge. But he was not satisfied with the ambience. So I had to place him in a good hotel and return home after 1AM. Next day's duty was to bring him from hotel to RPE, arrange for his talk and then say good bye. I had to decline his offer for dinner, as I was busy in arranging my sister's marriage. My destiny. S C Jain and W S Khokle were to assess CAS progress. Bring them from airport to VECC Guest house at salt lake, return to RPE as they needed time to be ready, again go to VECC to bring them to RPE. Lunch for me? Are you crazy? Another incident was taking Prof. Butcher to a film and acting as the interpreter and then taking him to K C Dass for rosogolla. Well I also tasted spending departments money. How many examples shall I give?

You may argue that talking to these personalities at a young age could improve my English. No, most of them, leave alone Butcher, hardly talked to me.

I was also involved in writing projects, procuring instruments after long wait in customs house, etc. Everything proved fruitless for me.

Research in RPE

After three years of unproductive research, I finally woke up and realized that I must produce papers. First, I got a paper as a single author. Then I collaborated with BRN.

After that 3 students joined under me for their Ph.D, Now it was a testing time; the tough job was to present the work well with good English. I improved quite a lot.

It won't be relevant to mention here why after a good start with Ph.D., supervision, I accepted the offer of Alexander von Humboldt Fellowship to work in Physics Institute of Wurzburg University. The outcome was, I got study leave and reached Germany, then divided, in April 1976.

Germany

There was very little scope in speaking English in my two months' language course. All students of Goethe Institute had to stay with German families to interact with the members and learn German. I could talk no more than a few tens of sentences with the four members, first in English (they could not speak English), and later in German. All teachers spoke German only, never in English, though they knew the language. My mates there were Americans, Englishmen, an Australian, a Japanese, two from Hong Kong, an Indian and a Pakisthani couple, with whom I could talk.

In the Physics Institute at Wurzburg everybody spoke English, though in their adda they used their mother tongue. Sometimes, some of them tried to convey the gist of their conversation in English. All films were dubbed; thanks to the English subtitle at the bottom, I had some kind of entertainment. The public libraries had a good collection of English books and I could borrow and read them.

But on one or two occasions, I got the upper hand. My colleague, Dr. Klaus von Klitzing once gave me the draft of his paper and said: *your English is better, so please read it and suggest corrections.*

How was my English viewed by English/ American English speaking people? In a conference, held in Berchtesgaden, Germany, I asked a participant *are you at the tail?* meaning are you the last person in the Q? He said *sorry, I don't understand German.*

In that conference, I heard Prof. Leo Esaki, the Nobel Laureates's lecture. The English, please excuse words from a small fry like me, was bad. Another Japanese professor gave a talk. His own Ph.D. student, an Indian sitting by my side, could not check laughter during his speech. I think, they are first generation Japanese, who migrated to the USA. Younger Japanese seemed to be smarter.

Again in RPE

I forgot what I learnt from Europe. During a discussion with an Englishman in a conference at Oxford, I was politely asked by him to speak slowly, so that he could

understand me. After that I became more careful and ignoring Nripen da's criticism, I practised চিবিয়ে চিবিয়ে ইংরিজী বলা ।

My teaching and research duties coupled with administrative work went on in full swing now. There was no respite from showing visitors different labs of the department. Prof. Nag became the head and after that the CAS coordinator. In most cases, he depended on Pradip Saha (PKS) and me for writing reports, preparing syllabi for B.Sc/M.Sc courses for UGC's proposed introduction of Dept. Electronic Science in a selected Universities and many such. His activities, both as academician and administrator, expanded manifold and both of us had to help him in different ways. I also got research students and started preparing papers. However, I did not face much difficulty and criticisms regarding English during this period.

My involvement in departmental administration continued when Amar Nath Chakrabarti, Hrishikesh Paria, Nripen da and Pradip acted as head. During this period, I had my papers accepted at international conferences, for attending which I need to apply to various Government agencies for funds. Preparation of the application itself is a kind of art: you need to emphasize why attending the conference is important for university, country etc. within limited words.

During 1980 to 2000 RPE regularly organized symposia, workshops etc under the CAS program. My first attempt was to organize a two day symposium *Semiconductor Materials and Devices* in 1980. I learnt how to write and send call for papers, send letters of acceptance, prepare scientific programmes, proof reading and final printing. It was a one man show as stated by BRN. Of course Prof. Anadi Nath Daw gave me guidance and useful advice. Writing a foreword for conference souvenir and draft of inaugural lecture for authorities and my own presentation of *vote of thanks* of course needed careful thinking, time and energy. A few other meetings deserve special mention. The first was S K Mitra Birth Centenary celebration in 1988, in which S Chandrasekhar, the Nobel Laureate gave the inaugural speech. It was held in CU's centenary hall and attended by many including even school children. After that, I took the responsibility of conducting memorial lectures throughout the year. I need not elaborate the paperwork involved.

The second one was quite ambitious. It was CODEC's first episode in 1998 to commemorate the golden jubilee of the Institute and at the same time to felicitate BRN after his formal retirement from CU. I have colourful memories and plan to write a separate article *How did the CODEC happen?* It was almost 3 years efforts by all of us. RPE at that time just got internet and fax and I became initiated to desktops.

Just to give you an idea: we need to give reply to e-mails coming from India and abroad, almost immediately. Other tasks involved, writing drafts of invitation to the Governor, chief minister, different eminent persons etc. The drafts for WB Govt authorities were to be approved by the VC who was the chairman. I had to write speeches for the Governor, who inaugurated and for the VC. Forget about other paperworks. CODEC was preceded by an ICTP supported 2 day workshop NAG. For that suitable application needed to be submitted. My younger colleagues who regularly organize conferences etc may well imagine the huge amount of work involved.

Encouraged by the success of CODEC, I ventured to hold an Indo-French joint workshop QUASEMOD in 1999. The work involved is almost the same.

Review work

I do not want to burden the readers with my long administrative and organizational works as HOD, CAS Coordinator, Director of UGC Networking resource centre in Physical Science and Academic Nodal Officer for TEQIP I. I do not wish to elaborate on how I wrote quite of few citations for felicitation (মানপত্র) of almost all my teachers as well as of A P Mitra on his 80th birthday celebration, obituaries, and biographical memoirs of BRN and Mrinal Kumar Dasgupta. A few of these articles were in Bengali however.

I prefer now to narrate my funny experiences about writing review reports.

Around 1990s I was regularly invited to review papers submitted to Physical Review and Physical Review Letters. As I strictly maintained the time frame, the requests became more frequent. The reviewer is asked to comment on, in addition to technical qualities, and suitability, the quality of English. In most cases, English from East European authors had been of poor standard. I remember a paper by Russian authors for PRL. Frankly, I was not much familiar with the subject. Even then the paper seemed to me a significant contribution, though I struggled to understand it in spite of horrible English. I had no other option to reject it outright suggesting that the authors consult a more knowledgeable English colleague.

But I was paid back in my own coin, a few months later. We submitted a paper to Applied Physics Letters. It was rejected then and there by the editorial office without consulting the Editor or a reviewer. Reason ? *The English is poor and we do not encourage words like "reported for the first time in the literature"*. No we did not complain, nor did we attempt to submit a revised version. Things started to be tougher from 2005 or so. More on this later.

Canada

From 2001 I made a few visits to McMaster University, Canada which is in the English speaking state Ontario. No problem in labs, but in day-to-day life it was difficult to understand people's nasal American English and to cope with them with my Bengali English.

Experiments with delivering lectures, session chairmanship, & report writing

I used to talk fast and inject many information when I was asked to give invited talks at my younger age. It was OK when you present papers within a stipulated period. However, an invited speaker is usually expected to give an overview of his own work, stating first the background of research, work done by others and his group's contribution. Later I realized that there was no use in elaborating and hurrying. Just give the essential points giving a good introduction. If you can add humour, the better. And if the humour is added during introduction, then you are well through. Presentation became easier with the introduction of power point software. There you write English in telegraphic language, and then explain. I heard many speakers just reading out the contents of their slides. I tried to avoid this practice as much as possible.

Chairing a session is not as easy as is thought. The chairman needs to maintain time frame, stop the speaker at right moment with very polite language, allow the audience to ask questions giving time limit, interrupt when the discussion becomes lengthy and controversial, and the most difficult part is to ask questions or add comments when there is no question at all from the audience. It needs careful listening throughout even though the talk is not in your field. To summarize, the chairman is expected to conduct the session with authority and courtesy.

An equally difficult task is to write reports after a meeting. I tell the readers what I learnt from our CAS advisory committee members. In one such meeting, an expert was very critical about our activities. His question was, institution *why RPE failed to raise its standard to the level of TIFR and other, in spite of being the first institution in India* ? There was exchange of arguments and counter arguments and the situation became quite hot, but then calmed down.

I had to assist the Experts in writing the minutes and recommendations. When I showed them my writings about the comments, the Expert said : *no, no, do not write these comments; it will carry a negative image*. He moderated the sentences. That was

a lesson to learn and I followed that in later periods serving as Experts. Recall what Prof. Ziman told us many years ago.

Similarity Check and English software

It may be around 2005 or later, that all journals started publishing online and slowly introduced online submission. Almost concurrently, most journals and then all started plagiarism check and imposed strict conditions about quoting from other publications, including even articles appearing in web. We first did not face any problem, only *the English needs to be improved* like comments.

I got reprieve on two occasions, which are in order. I made a proposal for book writing to an International Press. The editors asked for a few sample chapters. I was in a hurry and sent them some introductory chapters of my earlier books. They sent me their comments appending Similarity report. In some cases, it was even 80%-naturally. They politely asked me to change wordings, though admitting that the source was my own work. What amused me was the article *the* was included in the similarity. I asked what should I write? Thee or thee?

After all it's computer software!

The second episode showed up around 2017. Our paper was rejected by JAP. One referee did not read it carefully and made improper comments. I sent our objections and then the editor sent it to the 3rd referee who imposed almost impossible conditions, pursuit of which may lead to a good Ph.D. We gave up and sent the paper to *Physica Status Solidi*, published from Berlin. One referee put objections about technical points and also said the presentation and English must be improved. The second referee suggested minor revisions. The second version was submitted. The second referee recommended, but the first referee after accepting our response for technical points, gave more comments and at the same time recommended improvement of English. His comments were not however, speak of good English. I came to know that he was a Taiwanese. We sent the third version; yet again he stressed improvement of English and based on this the editorial staff rejected the paper, suggesting that we consult an expert in English or check the manuscript through a language software.

Finally, I wrote to the Editor-in-chief, stating my familiarity with English from school days, use of it in teaching, research and publications. I also mentioned that we did not identify any error in spelling and grammar, adding that *I admit that the paper is not a work of literature*. The editor in chief finally gave the green signal reluctantly, but cautioned that next time we must be more careful.

What can we learn from this story? Does the publishing house push sale of the software of its own choice?

About English checking, I have the following information to share. We collaborated with a Taiwanese professor (not the referee of our paper) and a paper became ready for publication. As usual, we checked the spelling, grammar, and composition etc to the best of our ability. The Taiwan professor then informed that he would send this manuscript for English checking. The paper exceeded free limit of 8 pages and IEEE levies page charge for extra pages. He said he had funds.

I had several occasions to visit his university and my colleagues and their students visited and made joint publications. Once I asked him about charges for English checking. His answer was USD 200/page. My dear readers! USD 1600 or roughly INR 1 lac 10 thousand per IEEE paper!

One more experience of mine still at this age. We are completing a book for OUP, UK. I had to send some completed chapters to the Managing Editor. She gave her comments; the most noteworthy was on my mixing tenses. Here is a imaginary example to give you the idea. In one sentence we used past tense and wrote *XYZ et al in their experiment used samples of dimension $a \times b \times c$* . In a following sentence, we wrote *the authors find good agreement between their results and existing theories*; now we use present tense. She suggested we should consult a knowledgeable person whose native language is English. Can you suggest how do we find him in India?

Remember, excessive proof correction will cost you in hard currencies. Either pay for it or the amount will be deducted from your royalty. How much royalty can you expect when you are to compete with a number of international expert authors?

Epilogue

Under the UGC mandate, Ph.D. students must take a compulsory course on Research Methodology. I participated in the course conducted by the UCT-CU and found that there were specialized lectures by experts dealing with Plagiarism and Writing papers for journals. These lectures give detailed information about the current trends.

The narrative I have presented is my personal view and I have shared with the readers my long experience and futile attempts to woo English for my profession. I do not make any tall claim of my contribution to RPE, knowing fully well that there are a number of workers in RPE in earlier and current periods with more illustrious performances and experiences. My only hope is that the readers will find some interest in my stories and try to rectify their deficiencies, if any.

Acknowledgement

The title of this article follows the title of Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru's speech *Tryst with destiny* delivered at midnight of 14th August 1947 in the Parliament.
