Sociolinguistic Perspective of Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*

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Abstract

Sociolinguistics recognizes that people use language and language is a part of society. It considers the relationship between a person's language and their social identity. Although Anita Desai works on the limited Canvas of middle class, Civil Lines, Delhi, she is able to bring into her work the larger political theme of the day; Partition, Hindu-Muslim riots, independence and the new India. The present paper throws light on the socio-political and cultural issues in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* and corresponding language variation. It also highlights the various codes applied in the novel through Code-Mixing.

Keywords- *Codes, Code-Mixing, Register, Speech Community*

Anita Desai is one of the most celebrated contemporary women writers of Indian fiction in English. She was born in Mussoorie, India, on June 24, 1937, of Indo-German parentage. Her father, Dhiren N. Mazumdar, was a Bengali Hindu and her mother Antoinnete Nime, was a German Jew. She is an excellent example of the bicultural heritage of Postcolonial India. She grew up in Delhi, speaking German and Bengali at home and Hindi and Urdu to her friends and neighbours. She learned English only when she went to a mission school. She said in an interview with Jasbir Jain, "I instantly fell in love with English Literature and it became my lifelong obsession".

Anita Desai made her debut in 1963 with the novel Cry, The Peacock. This work immediately established her as a major voice in Indian English Literature. Since then, Desai has steadily published sixteen works of fiction, short stories and children's literature. Her novels *Clear Light of Day, In Custody and Fasting Feasting* were all shortlisted for Booker prize. Anita Desai is a true existentialist. According to S. Jambaldinni, "Anita Desai examines the three important aspects of existential school of thoughts which are alienation,

quest and conflict. These three aspects are epitomized in the lives of the different female characters." (18)

Clear Light of Day is the story of Bim, one of the most mature female characters of Anita Desai. Bim lives with her neurotic brother Baba at Civil Lines in Old Delhi where everything seems to be dull and decaying.

Anita Desai has reflected various national events such as Hindu Muslim riots during partition, death of Gandhiji and migration of Muslims to Pakistan. These events provide a strong social background to the novel.

She has also given a brief account of multicultural aspect of Indian society before partition. Hyder Ali's family lives peacefully with other Hindu neighbours such as Misra and Das family. Partition and the resultant chaos compel Hyder Ali's to leave Delhi and move to a more secure place in Hyderabad. Raja, Bim's brother was much fascinated by Urdu language and the aristocratic life of Hyder Ali. He is extremely grieved to learn that Hyder Ali's have moved from Delhi to Hyderabad.

Speech communities

Speech community is a comprehensive term and it has lead to a considerable confusion and disagreement. According to Hudson, "The term speech community is widely used by sociolinguists to refer to a community based on language, but linguistic community is also used with the same meaning."(24) In order to study speech communities, communities must be delimited so that 'it may be possible to find interesting differences between communities which correlate with differences in their language.' Leonard Bloomfield had written a chapter on speech communities in his book *Language* (ch3) and since then this concept has gained popularity.

Definitions of Speech Community

The simplest definition is given by John Lyons. He defines speech community as 'all the people who use a given language or dialect.' (qut. by Hudson 24)

The concept of speech community is not as simple as implied in the Lyon's definition. Lyon does not associate speech community to any social or cultural unit. Charles Hockett provides a more comprehensive definition, "Each language defines a speech community: the whole set of people who communicate with each other, either directly or indirectly via the common language". (qut. by Hudson 24)

In the above definition, Hockett has emphasized on communication along with a common language. It means, if the two communities speak the same language but do not interact with each other then they constitute two different speech communities.

In *Clear Light of Day* Desai has portrayed life of Bim, the protagonist who lives alone

with her autistic brother Baba. Tara, her younger sister married a foreign diplomat Bakul; she often visits her old house in Delhi.

Bim, Tara, Raja, Bakul, Misra Boys and Misra daughters form a distinct Speech Community. They are well educated and belong to upper middle class. Their conversation provides a glimpse of common interest, attitude and a common language system.

Sample of their speech is as follows:

"Bakul- bhai, tell me, said the older brother, rolling the ice cubes around in his glass, as a diplomat in an Indian embassy, how do you explain the situation to foreigners?" (59)

"Bim, who was lighting herself a cigarette, stopped to watch her brother-in-law cope with this interrogation."(59)

"Elegantly holding his cigarette in its holder at arm's length, Bakul told them in his ripest, roundest tones, 'what I feel is my duty, my vocation, when I am abroad, is to be my country's ambassador."

Register

In Sociolinguistics, the term register refers to "Specific lexical and grammatical choices as made by speakers depending on the situational context, the participants of a conversation and the function of the language in the discourse."(Halliday 44) In contrast to dialect, which Halliday defines as a 'variety of language according to the user', register focuses on the 'variety according to use' (41). Thus register is characterized by "differences in the type of language selected as appropriate to different types of situation."(Halliday 87)

In the novel *Clear Light of Day*, Dr. Biswas, the family doctor of Das family and Bakul, a foreign diplomat use specific registers suited to their professions. Words such as Indian embassy, foreign press, ambassador, abroad etc. are part of Bakul's register. Nurse, matron, hospital, medicine, profession etc. are the registers used by Dr. Biswas.

Codes present in *Clear Light of Day*

When two or more people communicate with each other in speech, we can call the system of communication that they employ a code. A language or a variety of language can also be referred to as code. Code is a neutral term unlike dialect, language, style, standard language, pidgin and Creole which are to some extent biased. The term code is obtained from information theory and is used to refer to any kind of system that two or more people employ for communication. (Wardaugh 88)

Desai has consolidated the cultural diversity of India by using a mixture of Hindi and Urdu codes besides English which is the major code.
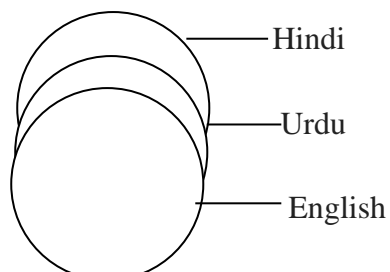
Hindi codes- *koels, sari, masi, bhai, Hato ! Hato ! suar ! sala ! Suar ka bachcha !, Ice cream wallah,sardarji, gol mohur, swamiji, Rakhi bandhan, dhoti, tabla, guru, chapati, chandni, samosas, shikakai, chameli, rossogollas, mithai, chutney, Ram Dhun.*

Urdu codes-*divan, salwar- kameez, nawab, Begum,vilayat, farishtha, zindagi o zindagi, chotu mia, Bare- mia, kebabs, pilaos , kormas , salaamed, shehnai*

Code mixing

Code switching is largely dependent upon the situation, as Hudson points out, "the language change corresponds to a point where the situation changes, either on its own or precisely because the language changes."(53) However there are instances where "a fluent bilingual talking to another fluent bilingual changes language without any change at all in the situation. This kind of alternation is called code mixing or conversational code-switching."(53)

Code mixing can be characterised as a linguistic cocktail- "a few words of one language, then a few words of the other, then back to the first for a few more words and so on."(Hudson 53) Speakers use code-mixing to get the right effect by balancing the two languages. According to Hudson "the changes take place more or less randomly as far as the subject matter is concerned, but they seem to be limited by the sentence-structure." (54)

Definitions of Code Mixing

Kachru defines code-mixing as "the use of one or more languages for consistent transfer of linguistic units from one language into another and by such a language mixture developing a new restricted or non restricted code of linguistic interaction." (193)

Bokamba notes, "code mixing is the embedding of various linguistic units such as affixes (bound morpheme), words (unbound morphemes) phrases and clauses from two distinct grammatical (sub) systems within the same sentence and speech event. That is, code-mixing is an intrasentential switching." (278)

Crystal (1997) defines code-mixing as a linguistic behaviour that "involves the transfer of linguistic elements from one language into another."(66)

According to Gumperz, "Code-mixing is a type of borrowing, where depending on various linguistic factors speakers borrow items of various sizes." (52)

Instances of code mixing in *Clear Light of Day*

"talked of the *koels* in the morning" (10)

"she had fashioned out of an old cotton *sari* by sewing it up at both sides."(10)

"he had been asleep under the wooden *divan*," (11)

"And if we still had *Miramasi* with us," (13)

"... roughly pushed past him shouting '*Hato*! *Hato*!' (29)

"…the man panted, red eyes straining out of the dark face. '*Suar! Sala! Suar ka bachcha!"* (31)

"…a brightly coloured bunch of young girls in jeans and in *Salwar kameez*,.." (33)

"suddenly shouted 'Ice-cream! Caryhom *Ice-cream-wallah*!" (35)

"strawberry cones for all of them, *Sardar-ji*," (35)

"or an occasional *golmohur* tree Scarlet with summer blossom." (42)

"Hyder Ali Sahib used to think of himself as some kind of prime, a *nawab*" (44)

"the *Begum* whom they seldom saw" (48)

"*Swami-ji, swami-ji*, will I have luck?" (53)

"Your son go to England? To *Vilayat*?" (54)

"…used to tie coloured threads on our wrists on *Rakhibandhan* day," (55)

"They thought he was an angel on earth- a *farishtha*" (56)

"So that a fold of his *dhoti* fell aside," (57)

"*Zindagi*, *O Zindagi*, 'he sang, tunelessly, and refreshed himself…" (63)

"Where is my *tabla*-player?" (63)

"*Chotu-mia! Bare-mia*! standing swaying on his thick legs," (63)

"You are insulting my *guru*." (64)

"We could not keep feeding them on *Kebabs* and *Pilaos* and *Kormas*." (64)

"Misra sisters halving and sharing a *chapatti*." (66)

"She put out her hand and touched the white flowering *chandni*- quite white and naked." (68)

"and give him cigarettes and *samosas*," (93)

"In his family the women washed their hair with *shikakai* solution and oiled it with coconut oil." (109)

"She wore a white *Chameli* flower in her hair." (105)

"He *salaamed* extravagantly as Bim cried out in surprise." (120)

"Tara whimpered '*Masi*, they say I'm silly. *Masi*, they called me a fool." (125)

"Has his mother sent you her home-made *rosogollas*, Bim." (139)

"neatly counted out, so many biscuits, so many pieces of *mithai*, so many fritters and a spoonful of *chutney*.(143)

"A woman's voice was singing the Ram *Dhun* mournfully."(149)

"…a *shehnai* player from Benares to play at the wedding."(229)

According to Desai a novelist should choose a language in which he/she is most fluent. She didn't choose English rather it was the language that chose her. She says, "I did not pick English out; I don't think a child of seven is capable of doing so. I must have simply picked the language which comes most fluently and easily to me."(Jain 62)

It is evident that Anita Desai is well versed in English. She has employed code mixing in her novels to create a cultural impact. In her novels the fusion of Hindi, Urdu and German codes not only enhances the beauty of the plot but also establish her multilingual status. Most of Desai's novels correspond to post colonial period. The society was undergoing a great transformation. Urdu had a prominent existence before independence but gradually it lost its ground and was confined to the Urdu departments of the universities. The plight of Urdu after partition has been very creatively brought up in the novels *In Custody* and *Clear Light of Day.*

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