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Post-colonial Creativity in Language and Cultural Constructions: Railway Discourse in South Asian Englishes

Introduction

The article investigates the effects of post-colonial creativity on language use, especially at lexico-morphological and metaphorical levels, by focusing on railway discourse in South Asian Englishes, with special reference to Indian English and Pakistani English. The argument lies in the linguistic as well as cultural processes of transformation that railway vocabulary undergoes in the context of South Asia, where the railways have always played a strategic social and economic role, since their introduction during the colonial period in the nineteenth century, in connecting communities and individuals, thus favouring contacts and relations. Given this complex, multicultural scenario, railway discourse and its communicative dimensions constitute a significant domain. New items, constructions and devices emerge as a result of various creative processes in order to accommodate and mediate specialized lexis and convey local cultural connotations that express a sense of identity, rather than merely adopting and assimilating the constraints of technical language.

The focus of the article is on creativity in railway discourse realised via English, a language regularly employed in education, commerce and science (i.e. specialized contexts and domains) in many post-colonial settings. In particular, the label 'South Asian Englishes' is adopted in the pluralised form as an umbrella term to refer to the network of English varieties spoken in the area.

After a short historical introduction to the railways in South Asia, the article will discuss the notions of (specialized) discourse vis-à-vis creativity against the backdrop of specialized terminology and metaphorical effects, considering in particular the category of "railway register" introduced by Seetha Jayaraman.[1] The article will subsequently look at examples of railways discourse from various published and web-based sources in which post-colonial creativity operates, with reference to the processes that sustain language variation, such as vocabulary fossilisation, lexical shift and semantic expansion. Among the non fictional sources the paper will also refer to Monisha Rajesh's *Around India in 80 Trains*,[2] a recently published travelogue that documents the experience of riding along the extensive Indian Railways network by a young UK-based Indian journalist, who comes across trains as diverse as the luxurious Indian Maharaja-Deccan Odyssey, narrow-gauge trains, overcrowded suburban local services and even a unique hospital train that provides help and care for the sick who cannot afford other treatment. In the second part of the paper, the research scope will broaden and briefly take into consideration creative stylistic aspects of railway discourse

[1] Seetha Jayaraman, *Railway Register – A Sociolinguistic Study* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2010); subsequent in-text references to this work are inserted parenthetically with abbreviation RR and page number.

[2] Monisha Rajesh, *Around India in 80 Trains* (New Delhi: Lotus Collection, 2012); subsequent in-text references to this work are inserted parenthetically with abbreviation AIT and page number.

in some literary texts with metaphorical and evocative references to the image of the train as an important, often ambiguous, sociocultural symbol of mobility and 'modernity' in South Asia.[3]

Some Historical Background

The history of the railways in South Asia is complex, but given the limited space available here the article will only take into account the realities of India and Pakistan, which of course were one huge territory during the Raj.

In India, Victorian engineers started building a railway system in 1853 with a line from Bombay to Thane, and many other ramifications and new lines were subsequently added, as for example the Bombay-Calcutta line, which opened in 1870. Several train firms were operational then, but they eventually merged into a single body, and by 1946 the entire network was government-controlled. Currently the system covers 115,000 km with 7,500 stations all over the country. Owned and managed by the state, Indian Railways (abbreviated as IR, भारतीय रेल in Hindi)[4] is now one of the largest train companies in the world and includes several Zonal Railways, e.g. Central with Mumbai as its headquarters, or South Central, with Secunderabad as its base. IR operates passenger and freight services, and manages connections with neighbouring countries such as Nepal or Bangladesh.

[3] Marian Aguiar, *Tracking Modernity: India's Railway and the Culture of Mobility* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); subsequent in-text references to this work are inserted parenthetically with abbreviation TM and page number.

[4] See *Indian Railways* http://www.indianrailways.gov.in, 12 March 2014, and *Indian Rail,* http://www.indianrail.gov.in, 12 March 2014.

Fig. 1: Stefano Piano, *Train in Tamil Nadu*, 1987, courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 2: Stefano Piano, *Station in Tamil Nadu*, 1987, courtesy of the artist.

Railways in Pakistan were first introduced in 1861 with the opening of the Karachi-Kotri line (169 km), followed by other routes, sometimes in mountainous areas and through passes and deserts, managed by different train companies. After Independence and the turbulent period of Partition, the various railway branches were joined together, but a part of the system had to be transferred to India. The current official name of the company is Pakistan Railways (with abbreviation PA, in Urdu پاکستان ریلویز).[5] Like many public services in the country, the organisation suffers from infrastructural weakness and shortage, a situation further worsened by serious accidents and bribery scandals, although plans for track improvement and partial privatisation are currently under discussion.

Creativity and (Specialized) Discourse: The Case of Railspeak

Not only do the two railway companies provide vital transport services in South Asia, but they also have a chief social and cultural role, as they serve and draw together huge communities and large numbers of individuals. Moreover, they elaborate forms of communication, in which it is possible to identify elements of post-colonial imagination at work, such as language variation and transformation in a range of texts and speech events.

It is probably an obvious consideration, but one worth repeating: language holds a pragmatic, effective function to communicate identities and conceptualise the world we live in, and in Bill Ashcroft's words it "has meaning in people's ordinary lives as discourse because it is intimately involved in their social experience".[6] Consequently, 'railspeak', the language of the railways, to a certain extent mirrors wide social and geographical contexts, which in turn are affected by local cultural practices and political actions. Incidentially, it is interesting to note how the pervasiveness of railway discourse is lexically productive even in areas such as swearing words and impoliteness strategies through hybrid constructions endowed with socio-emotional force.[7]

I will mainly refer to the extensive notion of railway discourse, which is related to the lexical, semantic and cultural areas of use in communication pertaining to trains, railways and all its other components, also considering fictional texts with their instances of figurative language, tropes and narrative patterns.

Jayaraman suggests the slightly narrower concept of "railway register" to define the different communicative manifestations centred on the world of the railways, for example written documents like letters, bulletins, signs or even oral messages like public announcements and communication between train drivers and station managers (RR 15-16). However, the more inclusive idea of railway discourse allows

[5] See *Pakistani Railways*, http://pakrail.com/, 13 March 2014.

[6] Bill Ashcroft, *Caliban's Voice: The Transformation of English in Post-Colonial Literatures* (Abingdon: Routledge 2009), 5.

[7] See for example the Hindi taboo expression 'teri ma ki station' (literally meaning 'your mother's station'), which embeds very vulgar connotations and is used as a strong insult, sometimes with variants such as 'teri bahin ki station' ('your sister's station'). I am indebted to my colleague Gianni Pellegrini (University of Turin) for this piece of information.

examples of semi-technical language and figurative uses, which may be important in fictional works, and therefore I will use this notion to sustain my argumentation.

In the Indian subcontinent, the presence of English in the railway field is naturally linked to historical and political contexts, and in the nineteenth century it was used along with Hindustani, whilst independence from Britain and the creation of two separate states (India and Pakistan) in 1947 respectively sanctioned the use of Hindi (written in the Devanagari script) and Urdu (written in the Nastaleeq script). In particular, in India the 1963 Official Languages Act authorised the use of both Hindi and English as national languages for official communication, with the latter planned to be gradually dismissed over the years, an action that never took place in reality. The question of language use and official communication thus is crucial and concerns aspects of language policy at different levels, which are also endowed with sociocultural and sociolinguistic implications.

As Rajendra Aklekar maintains, "advertisements, announcements, information signs, cautioning remarks within the compartments … and so many other areas of contact within and outside the train and in the railway station have been presented in the dominant language and script of the region".[8] Moreover, today English serves as a global lingua franca and as such holds a strategic position in many national and international sectors, which in turn determine linguistic attitudes and trends.[9]

The phenomenon of creativity has frequently been associated with immaterial, 'high' culture and observed in relation to verbal arts and humanities, in genres like literature, theatre or cinema, as a driving force underlying cultural and intellectual productions.[10] In this regard, Braj B. Kachru has lengthily highlighted the innovative power of creativity in post-colonial literatures, in particular when postcolonial writers appropriate and transform languages, styles and traditions.[11] However, from a Cultural Studies perspective, creativity can also be observed in material culture, i.e. that 'thingness' or 'material habitus' tied to the sense of concreteness of life, as objects and commodities acquire important social and cultural functions and connotations.

According to Catherine Belsey, "creativity is the project of culture"[12] and this view can be applied to a range of diverse manifestations and fields, including specialized discourses. Furthermore, it is worth noticing that in recent times the attention of researchers working within the linguistics field and related disciplines has shifted to other areas and now includes aspects of Anglophone world popular culture (e.g. music, advertising or food discourse), which represents a flowering phenomenon in South Asia.[13]

In general, the scholarly approach to specialized discourse usually emphasizes its technical or scientific nature and analyses a series of macro- and microlinguistic features such as monoreferentiality, lack of emotion, precision, transparency, conciseness and conservatism,[14] which are aimed at easing specialized communication in professional communities. Unsurprisingly, railway discourse adheres to these formal features and draws upon specific templates and styles. As Jayaraman notes, "most of the railway correspondence (at least 85%) is of a routine nature, for which

[8] Rajendra Aklekar, "Devanagari in Indian Railways", *Language in India,* 1.10 (2002), http://www.languageinindia.com/feb2002/railway.html, 27 July 2013.

[9] See Maurizio Gotti, "English across Communities and Domains: Globalising Trends and Intercultural Conflicts", in Marina Bondi and Nick Maxwell, eds., *Cross-Cultural Encounters: Linguistic Perspectives* (Rome: Officina Edizioni, 2005), 9-32.

[10] See for example Wimal Dissanayake, "Towards a Decolonised English: South Asian Creativity in Fiction", *World Englishes,* 4.2 (1985), 233-242, or Kingsley Bolton, "Creativity and World Englishes", *World Englishes,* 29.4 (2010), 455-466.

[11] See Braj B. Kachru, *Asian Englishes: Beyond the Canon* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005); Braj B. Kachru, "Asian Englishes in the Asian Age: Contexts and Challenges", in Kumiko Murata and Jennifer Jenkins, eds., *Global Englishes in Asian Contexts: Current and Future Debates* (Houndmills Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 175-193.

[12] Catherine Belsey, *Culture and the Real* (London: Routledge, 2005), 71.

[13] See for example Jamie Shinhee Lee and Andrew Moody, "Sociolinguistics and the Study of English in Asian Popular Culture", in Jamie Shinhee Lee and Andrew Moody, eds., *English in Asian Popular Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 1-11.

[14] See Maurizio Gotti, *Investigating Specialized Discourse* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005); Alessia Oppizzi, *Compounding in Specialized Languages* (Trento: Editrice Uni Service, 2006).

patented models exist" (RR, 15). At the same time, railway discourse in South Asian Englishes displays a certain propensity towards linguistic and stylistic innovation via for example lexical expansion or inventive word-formation.

The question of the intelligibility of global English is central to the agenda of international and intercultural communication and often generates heated debates, nonetheless it is not possible to ignore the impact of local environments and attitudes on the 'macrosystem' of English, encompassing questions and frictions about standard and diatopic varieties: for Kachru the process of nativisation of English in South Asia concerns microlects and restricted codes too, and as a consequence "in developing ESP we must adopt a pluralistic approach since English functions in pluralistic sociolinguistic contexts".[15] In other words, even in the case of specialized communication various forms of post-colonial creativity allow a reshaping of linguistic features and textual boundaries and constraints, thus ultimately expressing local values and identities.

[15] Kachru, "Asian Englishes in the Asian Age", 133.

Creativity at Work: Railway Discourse and Railway Register in Non-Literary Contexts

It has been noted that "there is substantial creativity in Indian English lexis"[16] but this characteristic holds true for many South Asian English varieties. One of the first elements of creativity in the language of railways concerns the naming of specific trains: whilst some passenger services do not have a distinctive name, but are defined by more generic categories such as suburban or express trains, or even 'locals' (shortened form for 'local trains'), and sometimes by a geographical reference (e.g. Decca Express, Panchavati Super Fast Express or Chennai Mail) and a train number,[17] others are defined by names that are semantically evocative. The following table concerns available train services, based on the IR website:

[16] Pingali Sailaja, *Indian English* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 66; subsequent in-text references to this work are inserted parenthetically with abbreviation IE and page number.

[17] For an example of how the complex number reference system works for Indian Railways see Rajesh (AIT, 199).

Name of train	Etymology	Notes
Special	---	running only for particular initiatives such as pilgrimages, festivities or other events
Mail / Express / Superfast	---	intercity trains
Luxury	---	ritzy trains such as Palace on Wheel, Heritage on Wheel or the steam train called The Fairy Queen
Rajdhani	Hindi for 'capital city'	trains running between Delhi and other important cities
Shatabdi	Sanskrit/Hindi for 'centenary'	the fastest trains in India, introduced in 1988
Janshatabdi	Jan (Hindi for 'common people') + shatabdi	a less expensive type of shatabdi express train
Garibrath / Yuva	Garibrath: Hindi for 'poor man's chariot'; Yuva: Hindi for 'Youth'	trains with economy berths
Duronto	Hindi for 'rebel' or 'rebellious' (with positive connotations)[18]	non-stop trains covering long distances
Tourist	---	addressed to tourists and foreign travellers to places such as Darjeeling or Simla
Special Hill	---	bound to the mountainous destinations like Simla, Ooty or Darjeeling

[18] In contrast, Rajesh for Duronto provides the definition 'quick' in Bengali (AIT, 82).

Even through a cursory look at this table, it is possible to see how post-colonial creativity affects railways discourse, specifically the lexical level with Hindi (or Sanskrit) and English hybrid compounds. However, to fully appreciate the lexico-morphological transformations that occur in this context, we need to take a top-down approach and consider the characteristics of railway register.

Jayaraman elaborates on the idea of railway register in relation to written correspondence (records, notes, letters) in India, focusing in particular on the Secunderabad-based South Central Railway. The analysed materials and patterns are distinctive of a specific railway zone of India (for the division of Indian railways see above), but they are representative of the documentation (and the language) employed across the entire train network. The characteristics and elements of the railway lexis elaborated by Jayaraman are attested and confirmed by other sources such as dictionaries, glossaries and tourist guides. Furthermore, Jayaraman's enquiry into railway register can be seen as suitable for all South Asian Englishes, since it captures some shared linguistic characteristics and processes, which are present in these and other local post-colonial varieties of English.

The first class taken into consideration by Jayaraman regards words with acquired meaning, i.e. lexical items that are used to define concepts that differ from their original semantic value. An example is the noun 'detention', which in this area does not mean 'imprisonment' but rather "delay in the departure and arrival of trains" (RR, 28), or the particles 'up' and 'down', which are respectively used to refer to "the direction of the train and tracks" and to "the direction of the train away from destination" (RR, 33-34). Here other varieties of English like British English or American English show a preference for expressions such as outward/outbound and inward/inbound.

The second category includes words with extended meaning, that is, words whose semantic hues go beyond their denotational sense and that often behave in metonymic and integrated ways, so that for example the word 'rail' coincides with 'train'. The meaning of 'sleeper' for instance is not what can be commonly found in generic dictionaries, but "the wooden or the concrete log supporting the rails of a track" (RR, 44). The case of 'bogie', a very specific technical term, is similar, as it increases its meaning to refer to a railway coach, a railway carriage or sometimes even a goods train in both India and Pakistan.[19]

Another significant example that Jayaraman provides is the term 'rake', whose extended definition reads "a sequential arrangement of railway compartments without the engine" (RR, 42). This is also registered by Nihalani *et alii* with the following entry:

> Where the reference is to steam or diesel, this word means a line of coupled wagons or coaches; with the addition of a locomotive, a rake becomes a train. It can also mean a complete electric train, with all the coaches including the driver's. It may have originated in the Northern English dialect form for carts or animals in file. (IBE, 146)

[19] See Paroo Nihalani et al., *Indian and British English* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 36-37; subsequent in-text references to this work are inserted parenthetically with abbreviation IBE and page number. See also Jayaraman, RR, 58-59, and Mubina Talaat, "Lexical Variation in Pakistani English", in Robert J. Baumgardner, ed., *The English Language in Pakistan* (Oxford and Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 56.

Interestingly, the possible etymological origin of the word can be interpreted as a phenomenon of lexical fossilisation of regional forms of English introduced in these territories during the Victorian era: it thus represents the survival of items that are now old-fashioned, rare or even unacceptable in standard English. As a consequence, style in Indian English is often described as "archaic and formal" (IE, 93).

The next examined categories are 'compounds' and 'code-mixing', which emerge as typical characteristics and strategies of both Indian English and Pakistani English, and more generally of South Asian Englishes,[20] in combining and blending various language resources and codes to organise and construct localised references and meanings. An example of compounding available in Nihalani *et alii* is the expression 'retiring room', as opposed to the standard form 'waiting room', which here designates the station premises where passengers can spend the night while waiting for their train and therefore has semantic and conceptual motivations since it "reflects the vast distances covered by the railways in India" (IBE, 152). The expression is also attested in Rajesh (AIT, 170). Code-mixing, on the other hand, is grounded upon the combination of different linguistic elements, usually an English premodifier (with adjectival or defining function) with a Hindi word in the head position, as in the case of 'rail niwas' ('railway resthouse'), presented by Jayaraman (RR, 74), or 'rail rooko', literally meaning 'stop the train' and by conceptual extension "agitation in which trains are stopped by protestors" (IE, 75). Aklekar also provides related examples which display the local linguistic influence on the compound expression, as in the case of 'bada-fast' ('bada' is a Hindi term for 'fast')[21] whilst Rajesh (2012) mentions the Himsagar Express a train with the "hybrid name of 'Himalayas' and 'sagar' – the Sanskrit word for 'sea'" (AIT, 15) that runs for 70 hours serving between 60 and 70 stations.

Jayaraman also takes into consideration other categories, namely the use of codes and the proliferation of abbreviations and acronyms, which are productive in many domains of South Asian Englishes, especially in Indian English (IE, 82-3). According to Jayaraman, "railway register is rich in the inventory of codes in the correspondence" (RR, 67) as they belong to different subcategories, such as designation codes (with hierarchical professional positions like JC for 'junior clerk' or CRB for 'chairman railway board') and station codes, which stand for specific stations across the network (for instance: NDLS for New Delhi, BSB for Varanasi, MAQ for Mandalore). Other general abbreviations and clipped forms include TTE (train ticket examiner), WT (a traveller without a ticket), or AC/non-AC (air-conditioned/non air-conditioned), and veg/nonveg (vegetarian/non-vegetarian) referring to meals served onboard.[22]

Creativity at Work: Railway Discourse and Railway Register in Literary Texts

Considering the paramount social and cultural role of the railways in the South Asian area and following Yamuna Kachru and Larry Smith's contention that post-

[20] See for example Talaat, "Lexical Variation in Pakistani English"; Kachru, A*sian Englishes;* Yamuna Kachru and Larry E. Smith, *Cultures, Contexts and World Englishes* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Sailaja, Indian English.

[21] Aklekar, "Devanagari in Indian Railways".

[22] See Shinie Antony et al., *Indian English. Language and Culture* (Hawthorn, Victoria: Lonely Planet Publication, 2008), 95.

colonial literary works in English "are a valuable source of sociocultural knowledge not easily recoverable from grammars, dictionaries and textbooks",[23] I will now turn to literary texts to see how railway discourse is organised and used not simply as a narrative setting, but as an apt device for the representation of local cultures and societies vis-à-vis the condition of modernity and its aftermaths. In literary texts, railway discourse is realised by means of semi-specialized lexicon, but at the same time it develops and acquires figurative meanings and metaphorical values, which somehow might echo the almost identical rhetorical mottos of both Indian Railways and Pakistan Railways, respectively "the lifeline to the nation" and "the life line of the country" (see IR's and PR's websites).

As a matter of fact, the notable presence of railway discourse in literary texts further demonstrates the sociocultural importance of the railways in the area and concerns both colonial literature and post-colonial fiction, spanning from Kipling's stories to recent South Asian novels in English. Therefore, railway discourse appears as an important literary theme or functional element. The number of narrative texts pivoting around or featuring railway discourse is huge in reality, as shown for example by the anthology *The Penguin Book of Indian Railway Stories,*[24] collected by Ruskin Bond, an Indian writer of British descent, which includes a selection of short stories and extracts from novels written by Indian authors before and after 1947, the year of the Indian independence. Sometimes railway discourse is signalled in the very title, for example in *Bhowani Junction* (1954) by the Anglo-Indian author John Masters, or Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956), which deals with the ferocious communal riots between Muslims and Hindus in the Partition period. In other cases it is distantly evoked, for example with Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* (1936), a term of Indian origin that typically identifies "a porter at a railway station" (IBE, 56).

The following analysis will focus on a restricted group of recent texts (published during the 2000s) due to space limits: *Ladies Coupé* by Anita Nair (2003), *The Boyfriend* by Raj Rao (2003) and *The Radiance of Ashes* by Cyrus Mistry (2005).[25] These three novels provide vivid insights into contemporary Indian society, and its complexities and contradictions, as they introduce and re-invent the potentialities of railway discourse.

Railway references in South Asian literary texts are often used as deictic elements to anchor locations and stories and convey specific meanings and connotations. They also exhibit social and cultural links when we consider the transformation of place names that has occurred in India in recent decades. For example one of Mumbai's busiest stations, Victoria Terminus (opened in 1887) was renamed Chatrapati Shivaji Terminus after the founder of the Marathi empire, in 1996, and as a consequence its code is now CSTM. But, in fictional texts, railway discourse can also highlight the complex multicultural scenario of South Asia: in an extract from *The Colour of Nothingness* by Pakistani writer Intizar Husain, a character called Shujat Ali affirms that "[a] train is a whole city in miniature. Hundreds of people get in or get off at every stop. You are bound to rub shoulders with all sorts

[23] Kachru and Smith, *Cultures, Contexts and World Englishes*, 168.

[24] Ruskin Bond, ed., *The Penguin Book of Indian Railway Stories* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1994); subsequent in-text references to this work are inserted parenthetically with abbreviation PBIRS and page number.

[25] Anita Nair, *Ladies Coupé* (London: Vintage, 2003); subsequent in-text references to this work are inserted parenthetically with abbreviation LC and page number. R. Raj Rao, *The Boyfriend* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2003); subsequent in-text references to this work are inserted parenthetically with abbreviation TB and page number. Cyrus Mistry, *The Radiance of Ashes* (London: Picador, 2005); subsequent in-text references to this work are inserted parenthetically with abbreviation RA and page number.

of people in the crowd" (collected in PBIRS, 127). It is interesting to note that the author employs the American term railroad, which brings the question of separate inheritance to the fore. Lexical duplication in different places and times is attested through the opposition between 'railway' and 'railroad', two words which originally were used as synonyms before being adopted by British and American Englishes respectively.[26]

In other cases railway discourse does not have an explicit role but filters through paratextual elements: Aravind Adiga's recent novel *Last Man in Tower* (2011) for example adopts multimodal strategies of representation through a map of Mumbai's suburban railway network as well as a dedication to train travellers: "To my fellow commuters on the Santa Cruz-Churchgate local line".[27] Such devices sustain narration in visual and evocative terms and also establish connections between reality and fiction in order to catch the readers' attention. In the literary context trains reach important cities and run through 'mofussil stations' (the Hindi word meaning 'provincial, small'), as the narrator of a short story titled "The Intimate Demon" by Manoj Das says (collected in PBIRS, 122). Generally, in fictional texts, we do not come across the specialized railway lexicon used for official communication presented by Jayaraman and others, although of course a part of it filters in the plot. Such is the case of Manojit Mitra's story "99 UP" (collected in PBIRS, 178-184), whose synthetic title indicates a particular type of train, running from Calcutta to Seulia (see the above reference to the definition of 'up' trains).

In order to tackle the thorny issue of gender relations and the role of women in Indian society, Anita Nair treats railway discourse as a framing device to arrange the plot of her novel: the protagonist Akila decides to break her repetitive life and travel by train from Bangalore to Kanyakumari. But due to the unavailability of AC sleeper or first-class tickets, she has to take a ladies coupé and share her compartment with other women from very different backgrounds. This gendered space eventually becomes a site of confrontation and reflection, as the ladies coupé, a dated compound expression referring to women-only sleeping cars, brings to the fore the loaded question of separation of public spaces based on gender difference and female seclusion, as regulated by the notions of *zenana* and *purdah* in Indian culture. The introduction of expensive special carriages for women in 1870 followed the traditional customs of means of transport for women, such as the covered palanquin carried by attendants, but it also brought significant social and cultural repercussions because "the way that the train marked lower-class women who could not afford the *zenana* ticket made them more vulnerable than they would have been because they were exposed and therefore perceived as sexually available" (TM, 136).

Railway references, however, also evoke the sensation of movement and freedom, especially for marginalised subjects such as women in traditional societies, as we read in the opening of the text: "the smell of a railway platform at night fills Akila with a sense of escape" (LC, 1). Apparently the ladies coupé symbolises

[26] Gunnel Melchers and Philip Shaw, *World English* (London: Arnold, 2003), 23.

[27] Aravind Adiga, *Last Man in Tower* (London: Atlantic Books, 2011), dedication page.

a form of female segregation, but the writer appropriates this context and turns it into an intimate milieu in which it is possible to address and discuss the role of woman in society against prescriptions and traditions, and eventually cement bonds and relations. From a narratological perspective, the idea of grouping characters in a restricted space to favour storytelling and interaction is certainly not original, but Nair cleverly manages to give prominence to and problematize female voices as the train travels across the country.

Naturally, railspeak surfaces in typical descriptive passages to provide details, yet it also constitutes a trigger for a series of sociocultural references in depicting the Indian context, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

> All railway platforms look alike. The puddles of water near the occasional dripping tap. The passengers with clenched faces and feverish eyes. The piled up suitcases. The occupied benches. The porters. The vendors with coffee and tea urns, packets of biscuits and glossy magazines. The garbage bins stuffed with litter. The cigarette butts. A crumpled plastic coffee cup. A chocolate wrapper. A banana peel. The pink and green plastic bags caught between the railway tracks, ballooning with the breeze, deflating in stillness. The once white but now silvery-grey stakes fencing the station in. (LC, 175-6)

Through the power of visual description, which almost adopts a 'photographic' style, the passage and several other parts of the novel hint at the rootedness of the railways in Indian society not only as a key infrastructural system, but also as a cultural framework for various aspects of life, a means to connect individuals with their plethora of stories, histories, memories and knowledge.

Railway discourse can be exploited for exploring aspects of other sensitive issues, such as the stigmatised themes of homosexuality, or the caste system with regard to the Dalit (outcaste) identity that author and activist R. Raj Rao represents in his 2003 'scandalous' novel. Trains are a daily part of the protagonist's life as he regularly commutes to and from Mumbai, and again it is possible to consider them in symbolic and cultural terms because they entail a sense of movement and freedom that restricted communities are often deprived of in traditional societies. Moreover, railway discourse reminds the reader of the context in which different languages are used for multilingual communication, for example when the protagonist is at Churchgate Station (a terminus train station opened by the British in 1855) and listens to train information: "There was an announcement. 'Owing to signalling failure between Matunga and Mahim, all up and down trains are running twenty to thirty minutes late'. The announcement was repeated in Hindi and Marathi" (TB, 17-8). In a nutshell, the quotation illustrates the main sociolinguistic scenario of communication in (urban) India, which is usually structured around three main languages (Hindi, English and a local language).[28]

Through apparently 'small' rail references the author can also illustrate the tensions arising out of complex local circumstances, for example considering the impact of religious practices on everyday life when masses of pilgrims travel by

[28] Incidentally, I would like to add that my investigation into the creative shapes of railway discourse is based on texts in the written mode, but it might as well consider spoken messages, for instance railway announcements (largely available in video format, for example on the YouTube website), which present particular stylistic and rhetorical characteristics. Here are some examples: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sS1D-D0hdPY, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfJ-iaYgNTs, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3tnkHBiqVA , 8 August 2013.

train to visit a shrine or attend a ceremony, and in turn generate various social repercussions and reactions:

> It was Haji Deewar Mastan, the notorious smuggler, who introduced the concept of free train travel on this day. Any Dalit who wished to go to Chaitya Bhoomi, even from faraway Nagpur, could board a train without a ticket. The practice continued for twenty long years. The railways incurred huge losses in the bargain, but didn't know how to put an end to it without the government of the day losing out on votes. Trains in Maharashtra were known to be packed to capacity throughout the first week of December, as men, women and children, wearing badges with pictures of Ambedkar on them, clambered for a toe-hold. (TB, 173)

The 'material', mundane aspects of railway discourse in reality are particularly useful for handling an array of social, cultural and political themes, including for example the mention of marginal hierarchical-constructed communities, e.g. the Dalit one, which is frequently discriminated and marginalised. Rail references, therefore, contribute to a larger cultural and linguistic landscape and, in this light, they can also be seen as dynamic semiotic resources (such as trainboards, coachboards and other types of signs) that for Pennycook evoke and question the sense of locality, mobility and language in fruitful processes of cultural contacts.[29]

[29] See Alastair Pennycook, *Language and Mobility* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2012).

Let us now take into account Cyrus Mistry's *The Radiance of Ashes*, which is rather different from the other novels as it follows the adventures of Jingo, an aspiring writer who has to deal with everyday preoccupations and goes on a quest for literary inspirations, often watching the world from the window of a train compartment. In a crescendo of darkening clues the railway domain eventually functions as a symbol for the representation of violence and conflicts, specifically the communal riots and destruction of the Babri Masjid, an antique mosque in Ayodhya, in 1992. In bringing to mind the effects of intolerance and brutality that break up the Hindu and Muslim communities, the text re-appropriates the image of the train linked to carnage previously used by other writers, filmmakers and artists representing the themes of cruelty and intolerance. Among them, we find Kushwant Singh, the author of the historical novel *Train to Pakistan,* which tackles the fierce violence of the Partition and the spread of its horrors as 'ghost' trains, in their physical hybridity similar to "a cross between a crowd and a machine" (TM, 89), are full of slaughtered bodies and become frightful moving images of dramatic changes.

A similar atmosphere of threat and fear is described in the novel by Cyrus Mistry when the railways become dangerous for Muslim passengers since "gangs of thugs roamed the suburban trains tormenting women, at least all those dressed in shalwaar-kameez" (RA, 389). Actually the riots involve various groups and take place in or near stations too, whilst people try to flee from urban centres to their own villages: "Now the train didn't stop at Ghatkopar, either. It just sliced through the crowds gathered on either side of the platform. There were violent crowds, waiting to attack. When it was clear the train wouldn't stop, they pelted it with stones" (RA, 393). Thus, also in this work railway discourse is creatively

manipulated in a meaning-making process which foregrounds some of the sensitive issues and contemporary anxieties of South Asia: in metaphorical terms the trains become mute witnesses to the outburst of violence that fiercely kills people, because "these were horrific times" (RA, 393), and then carry their load of memories, knowledge and histories. Imaginatively they construct panic and even allude to, or anticipate, contemporary forms of global terror, with attacks to trains and stations, for example with the episode of the 2006 Mumbai bombings, which caused more than 200 casualties in the capital of Maharashtra.

Concluding Remarks: Post-Colonial Creativity in Railway Discourse

In this article I have tried to cast light on the phenomenon of post-colonial creativity in a range of non-literary and literary texts dealing with railway discourse in South Asian Englishes, focusing in particular on language and narrative constructions. Seemingly, the railway domain exemplifies the restricted area of specialized discourse, with its constraints, systematization and technicalities, but in reality it is able to express local cultures and voices in a wide array of contexts. As a matter of fact, in both its formal and fictional aspects, railway discourse innovatively operates on different levels. With non-literary texts, it exhibits the hybridization of English in South Asia through strategies such as code-mixing, lexical fossilization and compounding. In the case of literature, railway discourse is not a mere embellishment or an element of detailed description, nor is it addressed solely to rail enthusiasts, but rather it notably contributes to the creation of a larger thematic structure that articulates the writer's style and intention to convey meaning.

Given the fact that this is a vast field, spanning Bollywood cinema as well (see for example TM, 130-148), of course my analysis is limited and should be considered as a first approach to the topic. However, what is particularly important is the interdisciplinary perspective that we need to adopt in order to investigate the sphere of post-colonial creativity. Discussing the role of English in the Indian subcontinent, Krishnaswamy and Burde argue that "linguistics, cultural anthropology, sociology and historical studies must come together to study how users change or manipulate communicability of languages in the modern world".[30] In this interconnection of domains and themes lies the core of creativity that post-colonial civilisations pursue in different modalities and shapes when languages undergo the phases of translation and transformation expressed by Bill Ashcroft.[31] As the examples considered here have shown, railway discourse follows the routes of creativity and testifies to the cultural processes of expression and reformulation that constantly take place in South Asia.

[30] Natesan Krishnaswamy and Archana S. Burde, *The Politics of Indians' English* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 157.

[31] See Bill Ashcroft, *Caliban's Voice*.