

# A Lexical Study on the Acquired Meanings of Selected English Words Used by Indian Railways

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## Abstract

This study aims to investigate how the English Language used by the Indian Railways is different from other registers of English, and most importantly what is the effect of this register of English upon the common people. In other words, the present study aims at viewing the variety of language used by the Indian Railway as an independent register. For the purpose of investigation, a stylistic analysis is carried out. The data for the current study are collected from the platform, directives at railway premises and inside the railway-coaches. Platform announcements have been collected from various railway stations across the country. Some amount of data has been collected from the directives inside the railway coaches.

**Keywords:** Lexeme, Railway, Platform, Meaning, Directives, English Language.

## 1. Introduction

The customary answer of the first train in India has been 3:30 PM on April 16<sup>th</sup> April, 1853, when a train with 14 carriages and 400 guests left Bombay's Bori Bunder for Thane, with a 21-gun salute. That, however, was just the first commercial passenger service in India. In fact, some other railways are known to have operated in India prior to 1853, hauling materials. But the rail transport system did not arrive in India in a single day or month. There had been debates in the British Parliament for and against the introduction of the railways in the colonial territory. But finally, all arrived at a Guarantee System in which the railroad constructing companies would be entitled to receive a guaranteed 5 percent return on their investment. So obviously it can be inferred that there involved varieties of announcements and notifications as we call today in the very early stage of the railways in India. The following eras in the railways' history in India also involved with different kind of public notifications, announcements, and advertisements. So, it is obvious that the railway's English owes its origin to the British. The railway network having spread all over the country had also led to the widespread use of English for internal as well as external correspondence. In due course it assumed an identity of its own and to some extent it can be thought that the variety of English got standardized. Irrespective of the sociolinguistic background of a railway employee, the language used by the employee is uniform throughout

the country, in a given situation. With the passage of time, particularly after the Independence, English used in the Railways has undergone tremendous syntactic, semantic and lexical changes, but retaining some of its original characteristics at the same time.

Present day Indian Railway's use of English can be discussed under the study of Indian English since the causes of necessity of the changes in Indian use of English are the same. Indian English, now a days, is such a huge umbrella term that it cannot be considered as a single register, rather it is gradually becoming a parallel variety of the British English. A brief discussion on the Indian English will follow towards the end of this chapter drawing a relation to the language of the Indian Railways.

The English being used in the Railways is a very interesting area of study. The correspondences made by the Department officials, proper degree of communication is the vital function in order to exchange information regarding the monitoring and regulating the movement of trains. Apart from those internal communications, Railways need to communicate to its common service consumers with proper degree of clarity which also constitute another set of vital functions of the Department. On a brief review of the written correspondences made by the Department, it is observed that communication does not necessarily mean grammatically or syntactically complete sentences. Information can be passed on and communication can be made very effective even with simple words, broken sentences, codes, abbreviations and acronyms or phrases. It is in such contexts that one can find the evidence of a register specific to railways.

The present study focuses on the language of communication between the Indian Railways and its consumers. The whole communication process can be divided into four categories: (i) printed notifications and advertisements, (ii) voice announcements in the railway premises, (iii) written directive remarks for the consumers in the railway premises and properties, and (iv) inter-departmental communications. The railway register covering any of these three categories can be analysed in terms of its linguistic features like lexis, syntax and semantics. But this has to be done in the context of its appropriateness to the situation in which it operates.

Written directives in the railway premises, railway tracks and railway engine or compartments are something that we are all exposed to. These are also something which are likely to affect most of us in a number of different spheres of our lives. It is reasonable to say that we live in a world of posters, hoardings and Sign boards. As potential consumers, we are always bombarded with all kinds of product or service information from various media, including newspapers, magazines, television, radio, Internet, etc. Advertising indicates the difference that exists between brands of products and alternative services.

On the other hand, by making people aware of rules and directives and ideas, sign boards promote awareness. Therefore, the forms of sign boards are very important. Sign boards and directives have many forms, but in most of them language is of crucial importance. The words in sign boards and directives are carefully crafted to meet particular needs.

The register of sign boards and directives mainly depend on relations between the two interactive groups and the degree of their shared knowledge in the particular domain. The medium is another important factor in determining the tone and nature of persuasive language. How message is

being transmitted from encoder to decoder is a question which influences the registral variety of the language. Even a poster's language will definitely vary from an announcement.

The study of language of advertising from a linguistic perspective has been attempted by several scholars (Leech 1966; Kumar 1978; Gopal 1980; Geis 1982; Vestergaard and Schrodder 1985; Manian 1986; Dhongde 1987; Hemamalini 1989; Mencher 1990; Satyanarayana 1990; Venkatesa Raja 1991; Suresh 1992; Arokianathan 1993; Manoharan 1994).

Leech (1966), in his pioneering and comprehensive study on English in advertising, has analysed in detail different aspects pertaining to grammar, vocabulary, discourse and rhyme and rhetoric of advertising with special reference to television. He has effectively related these aspects with the functional factors such as attention value, listenability/readability, memorability and selling power. Illustration, display typography, vocal emphasis, prompt spelling, grammatical solecism, metaphor and paradox are some of the aspects linked with attention value. Simple and colloquial style and familiar vocabulary are connected with readability. Phonological regularities such as alliteration, rhythm, rhyme and jingle are related to memorability. Frequent use of imperatives and superlatives are connected with selling power. The distinctive property of advertising language has been closely identified with the use of clauses, phrases and words as minor sentences, which constitute a different kind of grammar called as disjunctive grammar.

A comprehensive study of language of sign boards and directives by Indian Railways in different ways and forms has not been done so far. The present study has been undertaken in response to the above need.

The purpose of the present study is mainly to analyse the English words with acquired meaning used by the Indian Railways in their platforms, railway premises, and inside the railway-coaches and the documents which include time tables and other such documents, directives etc in different forms of railway territories, and official correspondences among the different departments and find out the differences in choice of expression among them.

## 2. Analytical Framework

The lexical data for the present study had been collected from the Corpus consisting of different kinds of written correspondences from different departments of the Railways, viz., letters, circulars, memoranda, notes and the like. For the lexical analysis work of Nihalani et al. (1979) on Indian English has been taken as the base and in order to suit the present study the model has been devised. In their 1979 work Nihalani et al. categorized the lexical item of Indian English on the basis of (i) Style, (ii) Collocation, (iii) Meaning, (iv) Loan words, and (v) Neologism.

Slight modification has been made while adopting the model of Nihalani et al. which has been described in the categories below. For example, Style and Collocation have been considered as one and to suit the present research lexical items under those categories were recategorized on the basis of their acquired meaning and their extended meaning. While working on the register with intensive use of Codes, creation of another category was felt necessary. This modification is done on the basis of connotation they carry in the Railway administration and the frequency of their usage in the correspondences:

- i. Words with acquired meaning;
- ii. Words with extended meaning;
- iii. Compound words;
- iv. Abbreviations and acronyms;
- v. Codes;
- vi. Coinage.

Codes were further divided into following categories:

- a) Station codes
- b) Designation codes; e.g., DRM, CRB
- c) Words used in conjunction and in abbreviated form; e.g., S&T, C&W
- d) Linguistically 'code mixed' words; e.g., Rail Yatri Niwas, tatkal ticket

Words with Acquired Meaning: Lexical Analysis

Words form one of the primary units of semantics. Not all the words carry their meanings in the same way. Some words function effectively in isolation while some others may acquire new meanings in different contexts. The latter kind of words plays an important role in defining a particular register.

Any kind of register has its specific vocabulary items which demand a study in relation to the 'use' and in association with other words in a sentence. Railways' usage of English displays many such lexical items which bear entirely different meanings from the dictionary meanings assigned to them. These are similar in form to those words which are used outside the Register as well. But they have a specific connotation within the Railways. These meanings probably have been acquired with constant use in the Register. This section will deal with some words used by the Railways assigning 'new' or 'specific' meanings, in detail. For the general meaning of a particular lexical item, Oxford English Dictionary has been consulted and, in some cases, to find out an easier similar meaning Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (hereafter OALD) 8<sup>th</sup> edition has been followed. In case of the use of OALD, the same has been mentioned.

#### 1. Detain (V)

Dictionary Meaning: (to) keep (someone) in official custody, typically for questioning about a crime or in a politically sensitive situation.

Acquired Meaning: Delaying to dispatching

The usage of the word detain (V) differs so markedly in the Railways that it needs to be familiar with the connotation to be able to comprehend the language employed in the correspondence. Detain (V) as used commonly means to put someone in the prison. In the Railways, the word is entirely unrelated to this meaning, and refers to the delaying in the departure and arrival of trains or anything related with regard to the scheduled time table. For instance:

2. Footplate (V) and (N)

Dictionary Meaning: (N) The platform for the crew in the cab of a locomotive.

Acquired Meaning: (V/N) Act or activity of travelling in a locomotive cab

The term footplate has acquired new meaning in present days. The dictionary meaning is now obsolete with the disappearance of steam engines. Originally it meant the joining space of the locomotive and the tender-box on which the driving crew of a steam locomotive had to work standing. But the term survived even in the operations of diesel-electric and electric locomotives. In present days the activity of foot-plateing means the travelling of the inspecting officials in the locomotive cab. For example:

3. Working (V)

Dictionary Meaning: To do, to operate (OALD 8<sup>th</sup> Ed.)

Acquired Meaning: To drive, to run

The word working is common in its usage signifying to do or to operate. In Railways' parlance, however, it has a different connotation altogether. In this sense, it is synonymous with maneuvering the train. Interestingly, 'operating the train' or 'driving the train' is not employed to refer to 'setting the train in motion'. But it is working which is the usage, strikingly different in the Railways. For instance:

4. Pilot (N) and (V)

Dictionary Meaning: 1. (N) A person who operates the flying controls of an aircraft

2. (V) to guide through complicated situation or system. (OALD 8<sup>th</sup> ed.)

Acquired meaning: 1. (N) driver

2. (Adj) guiding a following train in sensitive situations

'Pilot' in railways is used both as a noun and as an adjective. As a noun it refers to an engine driver. From the year 2003 onward railway engine drivers are designated as Loco Pilots and Assistant Drivers as Assistant Loco Pilots. The new designations are introduced keeping in view of the verb form of the word in general usage, but the word in that sense has been used as a noun in the railways. For example:

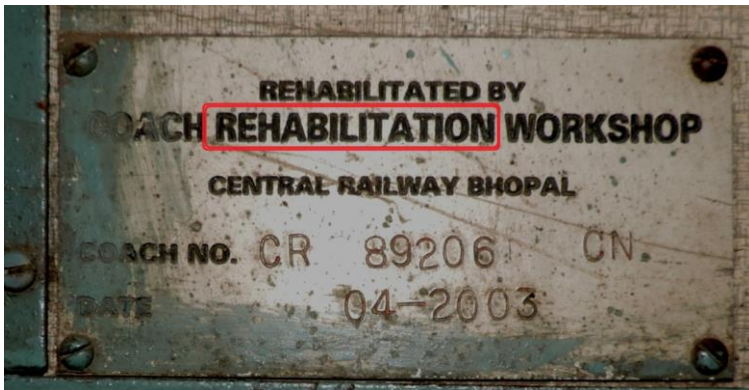
As an adjective the word in railway usage refers to the run of a locomotive or a train immediately before an important train for the security purpose and to ensure the safety of the latter.

## 5. Rehabilitation (N)

**Dictionary Meaning:** (the process of to) Restore (someone) to health or normal life by training and therapy after imprisonment, addiction, or illness

**Acquired Meaning:** Revamping the body of coaches.

The term rehabilitation refers to making something fit and useful. Railways, however, uses the word to mean a complete reconditioning and refurbishing of an old coach which had served a codal life and was marked unsuitable to be used on line. Apparently, this word has similar meaning both within and outside the Railways. But the feature that is specific to the word is that, it is associated with a (-) human noun, a coach in the Railways. In general usage, on the other hand, it refers to a (+) human noun.



Picture 1 Usage of the term Rehabilitation

Often the word is truncated as 'rehab' in railway usage. For example:



Picture 2 Usage of the term 'rehab'

6. Diesel (N)

Dictionary Meaning: 1) A type of heavy oil used as fuel instead of petrol/gas (OALD 8<sup>th</sup> Ed.)

2) A vehicle that uses diesel fuel (OALD 8<sup>th</sup> Ed.)

Acquired Meaning: A locomotive run on diesel fuel

The word 'diesel' is formally a compound noun, referring to the 'diesel-electric-locomotive' in which an internal combustion diesel engine produces electricity which is supplied to the traction motors mounted on the wheels of the locomotive in order to haul the train. In Railways' parlance, it also takes the plural morphemes in the truncated form. For instance:

7. Electric (N)

Dictionary Meaning: (Adj.) Connected with electricity. Using, produced by or producing electricity (OALD 8<sup>th</sup> Ed.)

Acquired Meaning: (N) A locomotive run on electricity

The word 'electric' is used as an adjective to describe something that uses or produces electricity. In Railways' parlance, however, the word electric refers to the compound noun electric-locomotive in which electricity is collected from overhead electric wires and regulated and modified by the engine before supplying to the traction motors at the locomotive wheels. Similarly, it takes plural morphemes like any countable noun. For instance:

8. Traction (N)

Dictionary meaning: 1. The action of pulling something along a surface. (OALD 8<sup>th</sup> Ed.)

2. The power that is used for pulling.

(OALD 8<sup>th</sup> ed)

Acquired meaning: Motive energy to run the locomotive.

In the Railway operations, it refers to the 'energy needed to move' a locomotive or a train. In this sense, the word is markedly different in meaning and its usage in the Railways. The motive energy refers to electric energy, steam or diesel. For example:

9. Up and Down (Adj) & (Adv)

Dictionary Meaning: (Adv) The direction towards a high or low levels.

Acquired Meaning: The direction of the train and tracks.

There are only two surnames for trains in Indian Railway; one is up and the other is down. The convention of naming the trains as up and down has its origin in Great Britain where all the trains going to London were up and all those going away from London were down. In India, Great Indian Peninsular Railway first adopted this convention for Bombay as up and then Madras Railway considering Madras as up. The East Indian Railway, however, followed the reverse, and

the practice was whether the train was going away or towards the headquarters. It is worth mentioned here that train names were introduced in India following the trend of its early day's competitor inland water transport system which used to name their individual ships. Water transport system also mentioned the direction of the ships as up and down with respect to the direction of flow of the water basin. Railways also adopted the same system at first for its short distance trains in the major river plain and accordingly directions became up and down for their operations. For example:

Train name boards often bear the directions of movements also denoted by 'up' and 'down' and very often 'down' is abbreviated as 'Dn'. For instance:



Picture 4.3 Usage of the terms 'up' and 'down'

#### 10. Kilometrage/Kilometreage (N)

Dictionary Meaning: Not listed in the dictionary.

Acquired Meaning: Distance per unit of time.

The word Kilometrage (N) is a new coinage, analogous to mileage, which refers to the distance travelled per unit time. The word is considered to be a new coinage because it is not found listed in the dictionary. The term has come to be employed in the Railways, perhaps because the unit of measurement of distance has changed from 'miles' to 'kilometres'. Therefore, the term to refer to the distance per unit time needed to be revised accordingly. Being a coinage, the term is spelt in two ways 'kilometrage' and 'kilometreage' and used officially in the Railways.

#### 11. Coaching (V) (Adj)

Dictionary Meaning: The process of training to play a sport (OALD 8<sup>th</sup> Ed)

Acquired Meaning: The act of connecting coaches.

Dictionary meaning of the word coaching refers to the process of training somebody to play a sport, to do a job better or to improve a skill. The other meaning is that of the process of giving a student extra teaching in a particular subject. In railways' parlance, however, the term refers to the activity of train rake formation. In railways' register the word is used as a noun. For example:

The illustration below will demonstrate farther usage of the term:

आगमन Arrival	प्रस्थान Departure	स्टेशन का नाम Name of Station	आगमन Arrival	प्रस्थान Departure
अहमदाबाद वाराणसी एक्स. Ahmedabad Varanasi Exp. गाड़ी सं.: 19407 Train No : 19407	वाराणसी अहमदाबाद एक्स. Varanasi Ahmedabad Exp. गाड़ी सं.: 19408 Train No : 19408			

Picture 4 Usage of the term ‘Coaching’

## 12. Branch (N)

Dictionary meaning: part of something larger

Acquired meaning: Railway lines that goes away from main line to small towns and countryside

A ‘branch’ or a ‘branch line’ in railway terminology is a line that branches off a main line and goes away to less important places. Thus, it differs from the general meaning of “part of the whole”. In rare cases they may not be connected to any mainline but may be some less important lines existing between two rural places. For example:

Also see the following picture demonstrating the usage of ‘branch’ in railways:



Picture 5. Usage of ‘branch’

In the above picture, however, the word branch assumes the adjective form, functioning as a pronominal modifier to the word ‘train’.

13. Rake (N)

Dictionary meaning: 1. A garden tool (OALD 8<sup>th</sup> ed)  
2. A man with low moral standards (OALD 8<sup>th</sup> ed)

Acquired meaning: Sequential arrangement of railway coaches into a train

The meaning of the word rake is totally different in railways. It refers to the composition of a train with all its wagons or coaches without the engine. Here are the examples from the corpus:

14. Running (V) and (N)

Dictionary Meaning: 1. The sport of racing on foot  
2. The action of managing or operating something

Acquired Meaning: Movement of trains.

Railway differs in the use of the word running in its register. It means something related to the operating the trains. In the Railways, it is an important term used frequently in the operational correspondence. In railways’ register it is often used in compound form, sometimes as pronominal modifier.

15. On (Adj)

Dictionary meaning: 1. being in operation  
2. placed so as to permit operation

Acquired meaning: Stop sign in railway signalling

The meaning of the word ‘on’ in adjective form differs in railways from the general context. Generally, it means something being in operation, e.g., “the radio is on” or something put in order to permit an operation, e.g., “the switch is on”. In railway operations, however, on refers to the red aspect of a signal. For instance, the following sentence from the data.

Also see the instruction that appears in the following picture:



Picture 6 Usage of 'on' in signalling

Interestingly in Picture 6, 'on' is used as a noun preceded by a preposition 'at'. This may be interpreted as the reference to the colour aspect of the signal instead of preposition in regular usage.

### 3. Conclusion

Most importantly, Railways have constructed their own vocabulary to serve their purpose. Sometimes they arise as a result of unavailability of the proper lexicon and sometimes by giving an existing word a new connotation. Extended meaning and changed connotations are two basic features of the Railways' lexicon. This makes the railways' lexicon stand apart from the general everyday usage of the same. Sometimes some new lexical items also find place in the register as a result of borrowing. Some words from Indian languages also find their way to the Railways' register as a result of such borrowing. Railways' lexicon is not limited to the borrowing process only. It also exhibits code mixing in several cases. And interestingly these code-mixed items find no relevance outside the railway parlance. Code mixing leads to formation of some standardized lexical items which may not have relevance outside the particular register, but play an indispensable role within the railways for smoother operations, eliminating any kind of ambiguity. Further, Railway takes help of coinages or neologisms in order to serve their purposes. When existing vocabulary is found insufficient enough to carry out an operation, railways often make use of neologism. These coinages and newly given connotations in some of the lexical items form the lexicon of the railways language and impart the uniqueness. To be

more specific and more effective IR successfully introduces the new coinages. Some such lexical items are being borrowed by other service sectors and some are restricted in the Railways' domains only. These lexical items stand for evidence of the existence of an unparalleled register in the Railways' domain.

Another important feature of Railways' register is use of different levels of codes. Codes help in reducing the writing time, eliminating possible redundancy in correspondences and facilitating speedy communication process. Codes are an integral part of railways' operations and highly standardized lexical items in its register. Codes are generally not distinguished from abbreviations, but in railway operations both codes and abbreviations maintain their distinction.

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