JER
KUSOED

Journal of Education and Research
2025, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 23-34
https://doi.org/10.51474/jer/19867

Article History: Received: November 12, 2024; Revised: June 28, 2025; Accepted: August 21, 2025

Original Article

Phonological Features of English as Spoken in Nepal

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Abstract

This paper describes the phonological features of English as spoken in Nepal (ESN) and interprets them within the theoretical framework of Mufwene (2001, 2009, 2015) and Yakpo (2023). The paper primarily aims to reveal the unique phonological patterns and mechanisms at play in the speech of educated Nepali speakers (ESN) who have acquired English as an additional language in Nepal and abroad. This study unveils several crucial findings. I observed that ESN speakers retain and replace some specific Inner or Outer Circle features or substitute or modify certain consonant clusters. ESN speakers tend to maintain some vowel qualities, while others undergo shifts in articulation, shortening the vowel length and merger. Vowel insertion and adjustment of syllable boundaries are unique tendencies of ESN speakers. These tendencies impact the stress pattern. ESN speakers tend to pronounce words according to English spelling. This paper contributes to our understanding of the emergence of new language varieties within the theory of linguistic indigenization. This study also underscores the phonological diversity among new Englishes by highlighting the intricate interplay of linguistic adaptation in phonology.

Keywords: English in Nepal, New Englishes, phonological features, phonology of English as spoken in Nepal

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ISSN: 2091-0118 (Print) / 2091-2560 (Online)
© 2025 The Author(s).
Journal homepage: https://jer.kusoed.edu.np/

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Introduction

Nepal is a federal republic in the southern slope of the Himalayas that preserves one of the region's oldest civilizational heritages and shares linguistic, cultural, and religious affinities with other South Asian countries, particularly India. Throughout its history, Nepal remained a sovereign nation, yet it was not immune to the influence of colonialism in other South Asian nations. The English language played a crucial role in the hegemony of Western cultural values over South Asian societies, and Nepal was not isolated from this phenomenon. Nepal first encountered English-speaking individuals in 1767, when King Jaya Prakash Malla of Kathmandu sought assistance from the East India Company to resist an attack by King Prithvi Narayan Shah of Gorkha, located about 200 kilometers west of Kathmandu (Levi, 1952; Poudel, 2021). For over 250 years, English has emerged as one of the most influential languages in Nepali society, particularly among the upper and upper-middle classes (Kerr, 1999; Poudel, 2021).

Sociolinguists categorize Nepal as part of the Expanding Circle (Kachru, 1985), where Nepali people acquire English through formal instruction in schools and universities and use it to communicate with foreigners, pursue higher education, and more (Poudel, 2016). However, Nepal's history of English acquisition also aligns it with the Outer Circle, given its cultural and educational ties with India (Giri, 2014; Pandey, 2020). Like in India, Nepali people use English as a medium of instruction in schools and universities, as a language for legislation and administration, and for creative and innovative purposes. For example, a recent study by Adhikari and Poudel (2024) enumerates the historical trajectory of creative writing in English by Nepali writers. Based on these characteristics, Giri (2014) argues that by the third decade of the 21st century, English is no longer a foreign language in Nepal.

Nepal came into contact with English about 250 years ago. In these years, ESN has developed distinct phonological, lexical, and syntactic features. ESN speakers typically acquire English as an additional language after already acquiring at least one language as their mother tongue. Many ESN speakers speak an indigenous language of Nepal, such as Indo-European, Tibeto-Burman, or Austro-Asiatic languages, before acquiring English through formal education or social interaction. This multilingual background contributes to the phonological features of ESN, influenced by speakers' first languages, particularly Nepali (Sharmah, Gogoi, & Wiltshire, 2011). To note, the study

treats ESN as a dynamic, evolving variety of English, not as a monolithic, unchanging phenomenon, and adapts to its context. The dynamic nature of ESN has accentuated phonological distinctiveness among ESN speakers through the adaptation of indigenous-language phonological features. In this context, this study seeks to answer the question: How do ESN speakers develop distinct phonological features?

To answer this question systematically, I first discuss the theoretical framework adopted for this study, followed by methodological procedures. After discussing the theoretical framework and methodological procedures, I examine consonant and vowel phonemes in ESN, followed by an analysis of how orthography guides the pronunciation of ESN speakers. The features presented in this paper are tendencies, not absolutes. I do not mean that the features described here are always found in ESN speakers, but rather that they occur in the speeches.

Theoretical Framework

I looked into the process of adapting indigenous phonological features and nativizing (Schneider, 2004) ESN through the theoretical lens of linguistic indigenization. Yakpo (2023) defines linguistic indigenization as a latecomer language aligning with a distinct language ecology, leading to dialectal divergence. This concept of indigenization contrasts with Mufwene's (2001, 2009, 2015) focus on the localization process in the Inner Circle. Mufwene (2001) argues that sociocultural and environmental contexts contribute to the evolution and change of a language. This theory views language as a dynamic, not a static, phenomenon that adapts to the needs of speakers. Mufwene (2001) argues that language-internal factors, such as phonological, grammatical, and semantic processes, and language-external factors, such as contact-induced changes and socio-political contexts, drive linguistic change. Linguistic evolution is not linear; complex, specific sociolinguistic contexts also play a role. In this view, linguistic indigenization theory highlights linguistic diversity and the adaptation process in a sociocultural context, and challenges the notion of linguistic purity. Yakpo (2019) further strengthens this view, arguing that the agency of the local community contributes to and shapes linguistic diversity in a unique context.

Some notable studies in this line include Mufwene (2009, 2015) and Yakpo (2023). Mufwene (2009) argues that American English has evolved into a distinct variety from its British roots. Several factors contributed to this process of indigenization: contact

between English speakers and Native Americans, intensified by the slave trade in Africa from the 16th century onwards, and contact with other European languages. Mufwene (2009) views this phenomenon as natural, attributed to the unique sociohistorical and ecological context of America.

Mufwene (2015) discusses how colonization and indigenization shaped the evolution of English in North America. The colonization of the Americas by European powers brought the English into contact with Native American languages. As evidence of this contact, English speakers kept Native American place names such as Mississippi and Massachusetts intact and adopted words like 'canoe' from Native American languages.

Methodological Procedures

Linguists often rely on introspective and behavioral methods of data collection (Meyer & Nelson, 2006). I preferred the behavioral method of data collection to the introspective one because the latter is often criticized for ignoring data from the natural setting of language use. Behavioral data collection can be either experimental or corpus-based. In an experimental method, the researcher asks respondents to assess the grammaticality and appropriateness of the linguistic structure in question, as speakers use language in a natural setting. I avoided this because the moment I asked the respondents, the natural flow of the language broke. Using a corpus-based behavioral data-collection method, I used my intuition to identify phonological patterns through linguistic observations of conference presentations, classroom interactions, YouTube videos by Nepali scholars, and schoolchildren's debating competitions. In addition to these, my personal involvement in various academic activities at the university, such as workshops, conferences, classroom discussions, and dissertation defenses, provided me with opportunities to observe how people use English in Nepal. The COVID-19 outbreak and the government-imposed lockdown from March 2020 disrupted in-person classes at my university. The university opted for online classes via Google Meet. The recorded videos of classroom interaction were available to me for my phonological data in ESN. Listening to television news broadcasts proved very fruitful, enriching my data collection. Further, I started browsing YouTube and found the speeches and talks of Nepali scholars and other officials useful for my study. I found a recording of a debating competition (available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9e7dxtgA2ZU)

in which schoolchildren debate on the issues of English as a medium of instruction in education.

I collected all this data in natural settings, and the speakers were unaware that their speeches and talks were being observed for linguistic analysis. All my informants acquired English after acquiring at least one of their mother tongues. In this sense, English was an additional language for them. All of them had reasonably advanced levels of formal education; it is also possible that several had their education abroad in English-speaking countries.

For the analysis of the collected data, I followed Schneider's (2007) Dynamic Model. Schneider (2007) argues that a distinct variety of postcolonial English emerges through sustained contact between indigenous languages and English through adaptation and nativization. I analyzed the collected data to identify recurrent patterns at the segmental and suprasegmental levels. I paid special attention to the realization of consonants and vowels. I also observed that the transfer of consonant-cluster management from the indigenous language to English, and the role of orthography in guiding pronunciation, were important for many speakers.

Findings and Discussion

A comparison of the phonological features of ESN with those of Inner and Outer Circle varieties of English reveals unique characteristics (Rai, 2006). However, ESN lacks institutionalization and codification in varieties such as Indian or Sri Lankan Englishes (Goetz, 2022). However, unlike these South Asian Englishes, ESN has not reached the stage of structural arrest, as defined by Yakpo (2020), though it has reached the stage of differentiation in Schneider's (2004) Dynamic Model. Structural arrest is a stage in the language standardization process in which phonological and grammatical aspects become considerably more stable as users begin to consult standard dictionaries and reference grammars. This stage fixes and resists change, becoming stagnant in structural development. This stage is often attributed to rigorous structural codification and the homogenization of pronunciation.

While some Asian Englishes, like Indian English, Singapore English, and Japanese English, have received extensive attention (Sailaja, 2009; Sedlatschek, 2009; Deterding, 2007; Stanlaw, 2004), English in Nepal, particularly its phonological features, remains relatively understudied. Regional variations exist, and influences from speakers' first

languages are widespread. Despite these variations and regionalism, ESN remains mutually intelligible among its speakers, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds (Poudel, 2021).

Consonant Sounds

Four contrastive features — voicing, place of articulation, manner of articulation, and aspiration — characterize consonant sounds in ESN. Unlike native varieties of English, such as British RP (Gimson, 1990) or the variety from the Outer Circle, such as Indian English (Sailaja, 2009), ESN has aspiration as one of its phonemic features for consonant phonemes. Aspiration refers to an extra puff of breath in articulating a consonant sound. An aspirated sound is produced with a greater glottal opening than its unaspirated counterpart (Khatiwada, 2009). Discussing the English language in the Indian context, Sridhar and Sridhar (2020) argue that speakers of postcolonial English transfer features of their first languages when acquiring English as an additional language, since they have already mastered those languages. Transferring such linguistic features, specifically phonological ones, from the substrate languages, i.e., their first languages, leads to the emergence and development of distinct postcolonial Englishes such as ESN or Indian English. Mufwene (2009) argues that languages evolve and adapt in response to their speakers' sociocultural and linguistic contexts. In such a context, the emergence and development of postcolonial Englishes like ESN need to be studied alongside the linguistic habitats in which they emerge. Some of the distinctive phonological features of ESN, such as aspiration, retroflection, replacing the fricatives with stops, replacing the diphthongs with long vowels, and non-aspiration of initial stop consonants of a stressed syllable, as in the phoneme /t/ in the word 'protection', etc., can be attributed to the transfer of the features of mother tongues. The feature aspiration is widely discussed in the Englishes of South Asia and is often attributed to a prominent phonological feature of Indo-Aryan languages (Masica, 1993). Table 1 shows the consonant sounds of ESN along with phonemic features.

Table 1

Consonants in English in Nepal

	Bilabial	Dental	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Stops	p ph	th	t		k	
	b bh	ḍ	d		g gh	
Affricate				tʃ		
				dʒ		
Fricative			s			h
Nasal	m		n		ŋ	
Lateral			l			
Flap			r			
Semi-vowel	w			j		

(Adapted from Poudel, 2021, p. 41)

Speakers of ESN tend to geminate a stop or nasal consonant that is spelled with double letters. For example, 'better', 'little', 'mammal', 'annals', etc., are heard as /bettar/, /littal/, /mammal/, /ennals/, etc. The alveolar stops are often retroflexed features in intervocalic positions in faster natural speech. The sounds /d/ in 'wider' and /t/ in 'cater' are heard with a tinge of retroflection, as /waiɽar/ and /keɽar/, respectively. It is worth noting that retroflection is a widespread feature of the languages of South Asia (Masica, 1976), including Indian English (Sailaja, 2009).

The Vowels

A vowel is articulated without any stricture in the vocal tract and forms the syllabic peak (Ladefoged & Maddieson, 1996). I describe vowels based on three main features: the degree of the tongue raising towards the palate, the part of the tongue that is active at the time of articulation, and the degree of the lip rounding. In terms of vowel height, ESN vowels contrast at three levels — low, mid, and high; in terms of vowel backness, ESN vowels contrast as front, central, and back; in terms of lip-rounding, ESN vowels contrast between rounded and unrounded. All rounded vowels are back vowels. The length of a vowel also determines its quality. Hence, we have short or long vowels. A vowel can be either a pure vowel or a diphthong. Pure vowels have only one quality

throughout articulation. On the other hand, a diphthong glides from one quality to another as it is articulated.

The short high front vowel /i/, as in *sit, bit, kid*, etc., found in the speech of the speakers of ESN is very close to the one found in native varieties. ESN speakers often do not distinguish between the long /i:/ of native varieties, as in *seat, beat, meat*, etc., and short /i/ in their fast speech. No distinction is heard between *ship* and *sheep* because of vowel length. However, they distinguish when they are conscious, for example, if they are being interviewed for English phonological accuracy or if there is a context in which the listener cannot distinguish.

The short front mid vowel /e/, as in *bed, shed, melt*, etc., is similar to the vowel found in the native varieties of English in these words. However, this vowel often replaces the low front vowel as heard in words like *hat, sat, bat,* etc., in the native varieties of English. Not only this, but this vowel also substitutes the diphthong /ei/ as in *take, day, bake, cake,* etc., in the standard variety. Hence, the words *bed, bad*, and *bade* have the same vowel among many ESN speakers.

The short back low vowel /o/, as in *hot, cot, dog*, etc., is also heard while pronouncing words like *coat, boat, sought*, etc., and *go, so*, etc. In other words, the vowel /o/ replaces its long counterpart and the diphthong as in *go, so*, etc., of the standard native varieties of English in the speech of the speakers of ESN. The short back high vowel /u/ and its counterpart, the long vowel as in school, in native varieties, get neutralized in the speech of ESN, thereby yielding the same vowel quality in words like *put, book, cook, move, shoot*, and *boot*.

For the long central mid vowel as in *bird, first, curd*, and the short central vowel as in *cut, but, shut*, etc., the speakers of English in Nepal tend to replace them with a short central low vowel/a/. The schwa vowel is heard in the speech of educated speakers; less educated speakers tend to replace it, as in the initial vowel of the word, like *appear,* with a short central low vowel /a/. The only long vowel available in ESN speakers is the long central low vowel, as in words like *cart, fart, market*, etc.

The two centering diphthongs, as in words like *here, there, sheer, beer*, etc., and as in words like *poor, cure, tour*, etc., and as in words like *fair, care, dare*, etc., heard in the speech of the speakers of ESN, resemble their counterparts in the native standard variety in terms of quality. Since English in Nepal exhibits rhoticity, the final –r is

retained in these examples, as in the SAE, but unlike in RP. The speakers of ESN make use of only three closing diphthongs. They are as in words like *high, right, fight,* etc., as in words like *boy, toy, joy*, etc., and as in words like *how, cow, laud*, etc.

The theory of linguistic indigenization is at work in ESN's speaking tendencies. ESN speakers localize certain vowels to approximate their contexts. In this process of localization and approximation, they replace or merge vowels in Native English varieties, reflecting the influence of local linguistic context (Mufwene, 2015; Yakpo, 2023). For instance, the short front mid vowel /e/ often replaces the low front vowel /æ/ and the diphthong /ei/ in native English varieties, suggesting an adaptation to local pronunciation patterns (Mufwene, 2009). ESN vowel phenomena observed in this section are an instance of linguistic indigenization. ESN speakers adapt phonological features to local languages, shaping the ESN vowel inventory, reflecting the dynamic nature of language change in multilingual settings.

Orthography as the Guide to Pronunciation

Pronouncing words based on the spelling is one of the unique features of ESN speakers. I call this phenomenon linguistic indigenization, as this theory posits that languages evolve within specific sociocultural and linguistic contexts, often incorporating features from local languages into their structures (Mufwene, 2001). This relationship between orthography and pronunciation is striking in ESN. Drawing on linguistic indigenization theory, I discuss how orthography shapes the pronunciation of ESN speakers, illustrating with examples from their speeches.

Very often, the orthography, i.e., the spelling of words, serves the pronunciation for many speakers of ESN. The spelling –ng of the present participle of verbs, e.g., *running, reading, eating*, etc., is pronounced as /ng/, but –ng followed by another syllable, as in *singer, finger*, etc., is pronounced with an extra /g/, respectively. In the speech of quite a large number of ESN speakers, double consonants in words like *summer, happy, bitter, channel, immune, attack, attention, paddy, appointment,* etc., are geminated; however, in my observation, the gemination was not found in words like *questionnaires, grammar, college, collect*, etc. However, this tendency is not found in the double consonants in the word-final position, e.g., *boycott, watt, lull*, etc. The final –b in words ending with–mb, as in *bomb, comb, thumb, limb*, etc., is often articulated, rarely dropped. Similarly, in words ending with –mn, as in *column, autumn, solemn,*

condemn, etc., some speakers articulate the final –n, often adding an extra syllable. In British RP and other varieties of Inner Circle, when the segment –n in the prefixes in- or un- gets assimilated with the initial segment of the host words, the assimilated consonants are represented as *–ll-, -rr-, -mm-, -nn-* etc. in words such as *illegal, irresistible, immature, unnatural*, etc. respectively (Carstairs-McCarthy, 2002, p. 52). In this case, the speakers of ESN are similar to the varieties of the Inner Circle, i.e., double consonants are not geminated.

Conclusion

In exploring the phonological features of ESN, the study revealed a fascinating interplay between the linguistic adaptation of the phonetic inventory and orthographic influences. This adaptation has led to a unique and multifaceted phonological evolution in the speech of educated ESN speakers. The ESN consonants show a complex pattern of retention and replacement by modifying or substituting specific English consonantal sounds. The vowel inventory of ESN shows lengthening and mergers, reflecting the intricate phonological changes that occur during language acquisition. This study contributes to our understanding of the phonological intricacies of linguistic indigenization in a multilingual context.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning this article's authorship and publication.

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To cite this article:

Poudel, T. (2025). Phonological features of English as spoken in Nepal. *Journal of Education and Research, 15*(2), 23-34. https://doi.org/10.51474/jer/19867