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“Desi people speak like this only.”

After coming to the Grinnell, I noticed an interesting usage of the word “only” present in the English speaking styles of *Desi* [ðesi] people, where we use the word “only” at the ends of our sentences for contextual emphasis. By “we”, I mean *Desis*, people who are native to India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. I was unaware of this phenomenon prior to being questioned about it by English speakers here in the US, and I have discovered that the explanation behind it lies in a specific type of construct in our mother tongues (Hindi/Urdu and Bengali).

Consider the following structure — a question with two possible responses, one with emphasis and one without. Underneath that, a Hindi/Urdu translation of the same is present.

“Are you coming to the party?”

a) I’m at the party, b) I’m at the party already / itself / only.

“Tum party mai aa rahe ho?” [tʊm parti mæ a: rʌhe ho]

a) Mai party mai hun, b) mai party mai he hun. [mæ parti me: he hu:]

This example illustrates the parallel between the English word “only” and the free morpheme [he] in Hindi that is used for emphasis. Here, “itself” or “already” could substitute “only”, giving a preliminary idea of how we use the word. However, in other cases such as the following, there seems to be no direct English translation for this Hindi morpheme.

“I’m hungry, do you want go to the grill?”

Yes, I’m (also) hungry only.

“Mujhe bhook lagi hai, tumhe grill jaana hai?” [mʊdʒe bhu:k ləgi: hæ, tʊmhe grɪl dʒa:nə hæ]

Haan, mujhe (bhi) bhook he lagi hai. [ha: mʊdʒe (bhi:) bhu:k he ləgi: hæ]

The morpheme [he] emphasizes the preceding context by implying that *it is already happening / it is already that way / etc.* Additionally, [he] also satisfies the functions of “also” and “too”, which is why we see that the word [bhi:] (signifies both “also” and “too”) can be omitted from the Hindi sentence and still retain its meaning. *Only* is used to execute the same function in English, and correspondingly, “also” can be omitted from the English sentence in this usage.

Consider a final example, an exclamation rather than a question —

“You need to relax. I’m relaxed only!”

With addition of *only*, the sentence heavily asserts “relaxed is exactly/already how I am” to a *Desi* person.

To further expand on this parallel, we consider the case of Bengali — the primary language in Bangladesh. Interestingly enough, Bengali too has a morpheme (bound) which carries the same meaning as [he] in Hindi.

Bengali translation —

[a:mi okha:ne a:tʃi] (I am there)

[a:mi okhanæi: a:tʃi] (I am there only)

My friend Fatin, from Bangladesh, is a native Bengali speaker. While he speaks Hindi, he is not nearly proficient in it, nor does he use the [he] structure in Hindi. However, he utilizes *only* in the same manner as those of us from India and Pakistan. Furthermore, as a 3rd language speaker of Bengali myself (being from West Bengal, India), I am able to verify that he utilizes the Bengali equivalent of *only* as well.

In conclusion, it seems evident that *Desis* use the word “only” to make-up for the loss of meaning of morphemes that cannot be directly translated into English for the most part. It functions as a complement, modifying most or all grammatical classes, including entire phrases as times (such as with “at the party only”). The only uncertain element remaining is the choice of the specific word “only” for its purpose, which seems to be arbitrary.