

Globish and International NGOs in Asia¹

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Summary

This paper discusses the relationship of the English language and NGOs in Asia, particularly focusing on examples from China and India. The paper starts by discussing the role of English as a lingua franca among international NGOs but questions how English is used differently on site. Its relationship with national languages and regional dialects is also discussed. Using Gramsci's concept of 'cultural hegemony', the paper first looks into the role of English as a 'hub language' (Deguchi 2006), and also as a 'dialect' often referred to as 'Globish,' which sprang from standard English. 'Globish' (Nerriere 2006, McCrum 2010) works not as the language of elites but as an intermediary language to bridge the gap between different national languages and regional dialects.

1. Introduction

Introducing the term 'lingua-politics', Deguchi (2006) proposed an interdisciplinary science, expanding the research of civic society into multidimensional arenas and questioning how a particular language is chosen in certain contexts over another. When participants have several choices but choose a particular language, he argues that the particular language works as 'a transactional language' (Deguchi, *ibid.*). Transactional languages change according to the needs of the speakers. When there are many languages involved

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and when people decides to use a particular language to mediate different languages Deguchi calls it a ‘hub language’ (Deguchi, *ibid.*). For instance, NGO staff in China choose Mandarin over English to communicate on site, Mandarin is chosen as a transactional language while English might remain as a hub language since it covers the wider network. Mandarin may also serve as a hub language inside China when several regional languages and dialect speakers exchange information.

While the position of English as a leading hub language is unchallenged among international NGOs in a global setting, the use of English as a transactional language is often challenged by national languages when we look into the activities of international NGOs on site. Deguchi’s concept of hub language and transactional language also sheds light on the functional part of English as a medium of cross cultural translation which enables the voices of minorities who are oppressed by the mainstream, to speak out in the international arena via the internet. National languages such as Mandarin in China and Hindi in India certainly ‘translate’ the regional dialects into the mainstream but they also tend to suppress the voices of minorities in the nation states.

As Gramsci (1971) stated, a culturally diverse society can be dominated by one of its dominant social classes or social groups creating a cultural hegemony that is expressed and shared by the majority as the norm. Such cultural hegemony, adopted as the norm is not coerced but is accepted by the rest of the society as a ‘prestige’. Gramsci also believed the creation of a modern state required a national language which helped standardize educational methods which in turn provides for equal and universal education. Gramsci also believed that linguistic change could occur, not through coercion, but through the exercise of prestige and the cultural hegemony of the dominant group. Children without access to education via the national language are also denied access to knowledge, and therefore, the power monopolized by the dominant group. Education in a regional language is poorer than the one received in the dominant language, so standardization of the

language alone could provide a way to equal accessibility of political power, the social system and its services.

Having come from the southern part of Italy which was considered backward compared to the north, Gramsci understood the importance of education through the dominant language, for those who speak only a local language have limited access and understanding of the world (1971: 325). At the same time, the person who can speak only the national language is unable to communicate with dialect speakers and, therefore, is unable to form political bonds with them. Gramsci's discussion on cultural hegemony implies constant interactions between national and local languages as well as interactions between different cultural levels, a process that ensures that "no social group, whether intellectuals or southern peasants, remains in a narrow province" (Urbinati 1998:151).

2. The Emergence of Globish in the international NGO sector

NGOs in the civic sector continuously interact with different levels of languages on site thereby providing accessibility to the services for everyone. Interviewing people in several international NGOs in China and in India, I noticed that interactions in national, local, and global languages illustrate different relationships between the NGO staff, between staff and clients and between the NGOs and their overseas funders. English was often used as a transactional language and a hub language. Yet almost all speakers of English I met in Asia (including Europeans) were non-native speakers of English and their English often did not sound like the Standard English propagated thorough British-American academia. Rather, English sounded localized and more like a dialect, less like "Globish" and more like "Locish," to coin a term. I also noticed that there are frequent communications in local dialects, national languages, and their 'Locish' on sites where NGOs work and it seemed that such interactions change their relationships and their languages as well. As Gramsci's cultural hegemony theory predicts, the very interaction and reproduction of their communication seemed to be cre-

ating ‘prestige’ in the information they were conveying. In a way, the quick language interactions crosscutting three levels of languages seem to be what international NGOs are good at, and that was how they create prestige and legitimate the information they provide to the local people. They also use other ‘action’ languages such as body language, sign language or brails. They talk the language of the local bureaucracy, as well, and are thus able to negotiate with the local government on behalf of the NGO and sometimes the NGO’s funders.

With multiple levels of communications taking place in the field, it is sometimes difficult to tell which language is the major ‘transactional language’ since there are several language-transactions taking place at the same time. For example, an informant interviewed in China, said it is not uncommon in his office to observe staff discuss a topic in Mandarin while looking at English text displayed on a computer screen and, when stuck for a word, switching to the local language (often Cantonese).

Similar situations were observed in India. A public health manual written in English is referred to by a European doctor in discussions with local staff who translate the discussion to a village interpreter in Hindi who then translates it into a local vernacular spoken in the village. This takes place fairly smoothly and on a day-to-day basis. No one questions the fact that those who communicate like this are constantly influenced by each other.

In this dynamic way, a hybridization of language and culture is taking place. Although Standard English is still considered the global elite language, the hybridization has created a kind of ‘Globish’ or an English dialect with a limited vocabulary (McCrum 2010).

Among international NGOs, such as MSF (Medicine Sans Frontier) where a large number of the international professional staff are not native speakers of English, they may use their native language (such as French or Spanish) when people from those countries get together. However, English

has become the ‘standard’ or ‘hub’ language and all documents are written in English and formal meetings are conducted in English. In some international NGOs, such as World Vision China or Green Peace China, Mandarin, rather than English is the ‘hub language’ since the management staff is Chinese and all speak Mandarin (many, of course, speak Chinese regional dialects as well as English).

In China, Mandarin is becoming the common language that connects Chinese speakers from different regions including Hong Kong. English is used much less as a hub language; yet when they communicate internationally particularly when they need to communicate with funders and donors, English serves as a transactional language. So, while Mandarin is the “hub” language, for NGOs in China, use of English is also essential in order to attract funds from outside of China. In this sense, English is the meta-hub language.

3. The Increasing Importance of English as a tool of communication

English education is strongly supported by the Chinese government which supports bilingual or trilingual education (Bianco 2006). In schools, major subjects may be taught in Mandarin, some science related subjects in English and culturally related subjects, such as history, in the regional language. Trilingualism seems to be the norm for minority education in China, according to Bianco’s report. The Chinese government understands the advantages of educating Chinese children in English as it opens up international business and educational opportunities, yet it does not want to switch the medium of education from Mandarin to English completely. Educating in Mandarin particularly in humanities and social studies is important, because it gives more opportunities for children in rural areas. Subjects such as math and physics can be taught in English medium in urban settings like Shanghai or Beijing. However, the position of Mandarin as a national language is unshakable since the implementation of universal education in one national language is viewed as the best way to ensure equality in education.

Thus NGOs in China also follow multilingualism: competence in Mandarin as a medium of communication is essential for local staff. As noted, most people are educated in Mandarin, so “non-native” field staff can easily find translators in the local dialect on site. On the other hand, pan-regional managerial staffs are recruited from professionals who are trained in two languages, usually English and Mandarin, since they need to interact with overseas funders and volunteers from overseas NGOs.

In 2008, Mizumura published a provocative essay titled ‘The time when Japanese language disappeared in the flood of English (Nihongo ga horobiruki)’. She is concerned that too much time is spent on teaching English in Japanese schools cutting the hours which should rather be spent to teach Japanese. She wonders whether the time spent to teach English to most school children in Japan is worthwhile. She maintains the time spent for English study should be rather spent to teach Japanese.

Mizumura seems to claim that studying English is not useful for everyone : only those who are ready to cross the cultural boundaries and understand the difficulty of interpreting other cultures should invest time for it. Yet such an opinion seems to belong to a minority today. In the civic sector of Asia, the role of English as a medium of communication took off particularly after the emergence of the Internet. English is used not only between offices in different countries but also as the medium to communicate between the national language and the regional language, often empowering the minorities which are politically marginalized in their home countries.

4. International NGOs and the importance of English in China

For the small and middle scale NGO in China, foreign financial support is vital since there is a lack of government subsidies for non-government organizations. Thus, English is an essential tool for access to international funders. In 2008, I visited the NPO Development Center (hereinafter NDC) in Shanghai, and interviewed Sarah and Sophia, the full time staff at NDC.

This NGO is headed by Dr. Z and enjoys a good relationship with the government. After having worked in government and NGO sector in China, Dr. Z studied at Harvard, then returned to China. Fortunately, her return coincided with the post-reform period. In a way, she is an exemplary ‘elite’ who can express her opinions in ‘standard’ English, representing the Chinese NGO sector, and work as a spokesperson for the government to explain about China’s civil society.

The NDC specializes in NPO/NGO staff capacity building training and consultancy, an area of concern since there are few experienced NGO staff in China. Dr. Z’s fluency in English allows the NGO to tap into the financial resources outside of the country; she can draft up proposals in English very easily and international funders recognize her good relationship with the government, and support her role as a good intermediary between the West and the Chinese civic sector. In 2004 this NPO was legally registered with the local government, and was permitted a wide range of charitable activities which are normally allowed only to NGOs which were founded by the government (GANGOS). Sofia and Sarah point out that their director built a good relationship with the local government which in turn supported their organization. They joined in 2005 and 2006 respectively as full time staff. Sophia was in computer education marketing service and Sarah was a Chinese magazine reporter. To be able to hire them as full time staff, this NGO had to be competent enough to attract foreign funders.

NDC seems to be popular with educated Shanghai citizens in part because the NPO offers opportunities for them "to use English" and also to engage in meaningful volunteer work; when they are trained as volunteers, the organization uses training manuals written in English, which are provided by overseas supporting agencies. NDC also trained local English teachers. Between May and July in 2007, when they offered an English immersion NPO training course in Beijing, the number of applicants well exceeded NDC’s capacity.

While English attracts young and competent urban volunteers to urban

mainstream NGOs, English also supports those who are not mainstream: those who are critical about the government also use English as a means of expression. 'It is imperative to use English since our voices are not heard well by the Chinese government,' Mr. F., whose online journal China NPO Brief was forced to close down due to a vague 'technical legal violation', told me. Their online English journal was attracting a wide readership overseas since it covered many active grassroots NGOs in China which were otherwise not known. Yet even such NGOs may not be successful in retaining their organization unless they speak the language of bureaucracy. Their strategy to use English directly protests the mainstream bureaucracy representing the voices of minorities.

According to Mr.W, in China, 'English is considered to be a business language that people can learn without questioning any political or cultural background; western consumer cultures such as McDonald's, Starbucks, Disneyland came to China with English. So it is not a problem for Chinese to equate English with economic success. Yet Chinese from mainland China have difficulty in communicating and presenting in English in international conferences. They do not speak 'good' English. When native speakers of English make sweeping statements, those Chinese stop talking in the international arena.'

According to an informant based in Hongkong, large NGOs often hire project managers returning from overseas because they can communicate and process documents both in English and Mandarin. These returnees are favored over 'locals' with similar management skills.

On the other hand, Mr. W. points out, while international staff should use 'good and competent English' that level is not required as long as the staff remains in China. Inside China, Mandarin is the most powerful language and even overseas funders and big international NGOs should speak the language. Contracts and agreements are written in Mandarin and a Chinese who fluently speaks English will sometimes choose to use local interpreters

as a strategy in negotiations.

The insistence of using English as a means of communication as Mr. F suggests, illustrates the essential feature of English as a language to represent voices of minorities which are often suppressed by the mainstream.

5. International NGOs in India

There is a significant difference between China and India regarding a national language. While China has established a single national language and succeeded in implementing universal education in one language, India has not. Efforts to make Hindi the national language were strongly opposed in south India, where the cultural hegemony of the north was feared. As a result, India has 22 official (scheduled) languages and, hundreds of dialects. Usually, several languages are spoken in a single village. Even so, English has become the hegemonic language encompassing the regional differences and parents, with the means, generally prefer to send their children to costly English medium schools rather than local language schools.

The ‘cultural hegemony’ Mandarin enjoys in China works to build a strong cultural identity as a nation, which contrasts sharply with the situation in India where Hindi has not.

Although Hindi is widely used in northern Indian states, it is only one of the 22 official (scheduled) languages in India; in the southern states where there are strong anti-north sentiments, there has been a strong reaction of proposals to make Hindi as a national language. ‘After all, if you choose Hindi as a national language, those non-Hindi speakers will be in strong disadvantage. Therefore, we feel it’s better to support English rather than letting Hindi become a national language.’, says one of a Tamil speaker in Tamil Nadu, southern India.

In China, few organizations are allowed to act as ‘non-operating’ founda-

tions that can receive large grants from international foundations and then ‘re-grant’ the money to grassroots non-profits. India works differently. According to the Ford Foundation South Asia, it does not deal directly with grassroots NGOs in India. Instead, it funds several indigenous middle-sized foundations which, then, independently make smaller grants to grassroots organizations.

The Dalit Foundation, which works mostly with India’s oppressed minority castes (Dalits, or ex-untouchables) is one. This Indian foundation, annually receives a large grant from Ford, then using its own criteria, re-grants the funds to several grassroots organizations working for Dalit rights.

Rita, the director of the Dalit Foundation, said their main job is to mediate on behalf of small indigenous organizations that can’t easily approach overseas funders. They help them draft a project proposal in their native language (they can communicate in 5-6 languages), put their proposal in order, screen, and fund the projects. According to Rita, their funding mostly (40%) goes to North Indian NGOs while South and Eastern India receive around 20%, respectively.

‘Southern Indian NGOs are much better in drafting proposals; a lot of them can even manage to write in English while in the North, their applications are not well organized and need a lot of help.’

A large part of their time is taken up by the multilingual translation. Here English is the hub language into which various local languages are to be translated and even Hindi, the ‘national language’, is only one of those local languages when it comes to applications to funders. On the other hand, the following case of MSF shows how Hindi, the national language (of the North) is used as the transactional language in the workplace.

International NGOs such as MSF, Caritas and the Red Cross are more or less autonomous in each office as they form of a loose confederation. In the

case of MSF Delhi, their headquarter is in Switzerland. Dutch MSF operates in Bombay while Belgium and Spain MSF operate in Bihar. Management staffs are mostly local but both directors and medical experts are recruited internationally. Since people are from multinational environment, English is used as their lingua-franca even though MSF was originally started in France. The common language they use may differ from place to place; in some parts of Africa French is used while most people sent to South American countries use Spanish as the transactional language. Yet English is the official language, most documents are written in English and discussions take place in English at the management level.

On the other hand, many disaster-affected zones in India are Hindi-speaking regions. Even if there are people who do not speak Hindi, Hindi is still used as an intermediary language. For example, patients' Santal language is interpreted into English via Hindi. Santal to Hindi and Hindi to English sometimes confuses the doctors. But in the medical treatment, what is important is to show results: patients immediately understand the situation. However, when medical professionals do not understand the cultural and social background of patients, it is embarrassing to the locals. For example, when Western medical professionals don't understand the social situations that local women are placed, it is the responsibility of the field staff-interpreter to cover this. Likewise, some expressions to express pain change meanings when interpreted into English from different languages.

Located in Chennai in Tamil Nadu, World Vision India has numerous number of local staff who speak multiple languages. All e-mails and documents are written in English, and conversation is carried out mostly in English. World Vision recruit people who speak several regional languages, including Hindi. It is not essential for them to carry on conversations in English, but most of the staff do so. Although Tamil Nadu is well known to be an "anti-Hindi" state, as a headquarter of India World Vision, the director says expertise in speaking Hindi is required if the staff wants to move around inside India, particularly to Northern states.

In the field, WV field staffs are frequently requested to do a quick translation of materials given by their office, so they should know Hindi in addition to having a good command of English. Body language however, is a more powerful tool than speech languages particularly to villagers, as they understand more quickly.

The field staff speak less standard English as compared with the management staff, but they communicate well with European or American volunteers who understand the Globish-like English dialects they speak.

6. Japanese NGOs and English

Since the 1990s, thanks to the development of the Internet, Japanese NGOs have been networking both domestically and globally. In the beginning, they used faxes to communicate, but that was quickly overtaken by the Internet. They also started to communicate with foreign NGOs around the world, participated in global campaigns such as the campaign to ban landmines with the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), and promoted the landmines-ban treaty (Hirata 2002: 65). Thanks to technology, Japanese NGOs can take advantage of English by creating their own homepages, sending Emails, both in English and in Japanese. Their relative weakness in communicative (spoken) English does not seem to prevent them from networking globally.

The diffusion of transnational norms and the skill revolution of individuals via the Internet have worked as a breakthrough for globalization. Thus Hirata maintains optimistically that the Japanese have started to challenge existing authority and are shifting loyalties from national authorities to global non-state collectivities (Hirata 2002 : 649). This seems to have taken place hand-in-hand with the use of English as a means of global communication. English education in Japan has been oscillating between the yearnings for western civilization versus anachronistic nationalism. This oscillating trend has made Japan one of the most lucrative markets for English education,

even though the government resists the use of English as a medium of education, in part for fear of losing its national identity. Confusingly then, English is still a subject of college entrance examinations which test English grammar and reading ability.

In Japan and in Asian countries, NGOs are connecting-diverse ethnic groups and diverse languages with English as the essential hub language. Whether staff are good at actually ‘speaking like native speakers of English’ does seem to matter much-English is used less as a culture-specific language and more as an information translation device. In the final section, I would like to discuss the possibility of Globish as a global language for international NGOs.

Conclusion : Globish as the language of Globalization

Discussing the diversification of English, Abley (2008) stresses how dynamic interactions maintain the vitality of the language. English is changing as both a localized and a global language. Thus English such as Singlish (Singaporean English), Indian English, or Konglish (Hong Kong English), Spanglish spoken by Chicanos in the USA, is the outcome of speakers’struggles to stretch out and connect their mother tongue and English. The dialects are strongly localized, but are still mutually understandable. And just like Cockney, which is widely spoken by British English native speakers of traditional London’s working class, or ‘Black’ English in America, they embody specific cultures. Cyberspace also shows how communication has changed the traditional way of written and spoken languages, not only of English but also of other major languages. The old rules of language use in many countries are eroding and the ‘erosion may be long overdue ’ (p.217). Abley is highly optimistic about such transformational stages of languages as they are the healthy way to survive in a globalizing world. They clearly show that simplification of standard grammar, and the addition of thousands of new words to signify objects and concepts, through constant interactions are unavoidable. Unless the speakers of minority language keep on

inventing new words to enrich their language, that language is almost certainly ‘on its way out’ (P.223).

Deguchi’s definition of ‘hub language’ cannot explain such dynamic ongoing transformations which are taking place at the moment as it does not include any synergy effect as discussed by Abley (2008) or Nerriere (2006). In the globalizing world, cultural hybridity has been accelerated rapidly and English as a global language is expected to embody both global and local characteristics. In spite of Mizushima’s pessimistic view, English as Globish is not suppressing other languages. Instead, according to Nerriere (2006), Globish does maintain them as the transmitters of identity and the bearers of their own cultures since speakers of Globish always speak English as a second language. Globish, according to Nerriere (2006), is the ‘worldwide dialect of the third millennium; the ‘decaffenated English’ (Abley 2008:97). In the 21st century, power is more elusive. In addition to the traditional ‘state’, it exists in the amorphous ‘network states’ as visualized by Castells (1998). Working with such networked amorphous civic society, we will tend to have multiple hub languages. International NGOs are expected to speak multiple hub languages and assure people that their identities and cultures are in flux but still in the process of ‘upgrading’. Yet questions remain. How can villagers who speak only one language cope well in a globalizing world? I would like to focus my analysis on the glocalization of English language in Asia, particularly in the actual sites where the staff of international NGOs interact with local villagers. How do the grassroots level NGO staff cope with the stress of cross-cutting different languages? Is it as easy as Abley or Nerriere imply? But this is a topic for another paper.

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