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978-1-107-06261-0 - Communicating with Asia: The Future of English as a Global Language

Edited by Gerhard Leitner, Azirah Hashim and Hans-Georg Wolf

Excerpt

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Communicating with Asia: introduction

Gerhard Leitner, Azirah Hashim, Hans-Georg Wolf

The catchy slogan, ‘The Asian Century’, epitomizes a variety of interests in Asia. In today’s global world, communication with Asia is a central necessity. The continent does receive considerable attention from a variety of angles (inter alia, political, financial, military, cultural, ecological and touristic). This book looks at Asia from communicative and linguistic angles.¹ As far as English is concerned, there is a considerable body of research to build on (e.g., Bolton 2003; Bolton and Kachru 2007; Bautista and Bolton 2008; Kirkpatrick 2010a, 2012; Low and Azirah 2012). The chapters in this book will expand on that, but the book will go further and include a number of other ‘Asian’ languages that hitherto have been neglected to have a better understanding of Asia’s languages habitats. Moreover, we also take into account the communicative needs of ‘outsiders’ in dealing with this continent.

What is Asia? Like all geographic terms, *Asia* hides a number of different readings. Its geographic expansion is vast, stretching from the Middle East to Japan. From a historical angle, Asia can be seen as the site of large migrations, trading networks and the expansion and exchanges of goods, political systems and powers, cultures, religions, languages and scripts. It was, and is, one might say, a site of globalization. A few migrations in the past should be mentioned. The Indo-Aryan languages moved into South Asia around the tenth century BC. Under Alexander the Great, the Greeks conquered parts of today’s Pakistan, where Greek can still be found in some remote areas. The Persians established the Mughal Empire in the sixteenth century AD. There were migrations of the Hans into China, who ruled the country from 202 BC to AD 220. The southern parts of Asia were the site of a ‘global’ trade network from the seventh century to the eighteenth century that connected South China and Japan with the Middle East and East Africa from the pre-Islamic period onward. It was transformed under the influence of European trading companies and, later, colonizing countries. Asia was ‘known’ to Europe in a globalizing world and vice versa through explorations, the Silk Road and the maritime Silk Road, both of which have been made a significant topic in recent debates.

A geopolitical map of Asia used by the United Nations divides the continent into six large subregions, that is, the Middle East, Central Asia, South

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Asia, South-East Asia, East Asia and North Asia (which may include Eastern Europe, and is sometimes called Eastern Europe). Below that level are a few very large nations, such as China and India, and a large number of small nations, such as Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka or (South) Korea. Nations and their regions are not only interacting within and between themselves, but they are connecting with other world regions. An interregional body is ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations) with ten member states. The ‘three plus’, that is, China, Japan and Korea, make it a cross-regional institution. APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) connects Asia with Australia, New Zealand and the United States. Some Middle East countries are connected to the European Union, which is also an associated member of ASEAN. National institutions, such as the German Alexander-von-Humboldt Foundation, the British Council or media bodies, build ever more focused networks in Asia. Within these structures, one can identify some very dynamic and interactive regions in South, South-East and East Asia that are ever more closely connected through a variety of political, commercial, educational and other networks. The growth of higher education is phenomenal in, for example, China or Singapore, with universities ranking high in Shanghai Jiaotong, QS or Times Higher Education World University Ranking ranking systems, which helps them attract foreign students and researchers. Regional partnerships are emerging, with some countries being better placed or embracing large regional and global challenges more willingly than others. Education and human resource development (Azirah and Leitner 2014) have become signals of the transformation of societies and of the creation of vast Asian networks. Some countries such as Malaysia are attempting to become education *hubs* and to increase their foreign student intake dramatically within the coming decade through a variety of partly government-sponsored exchange mobility programmes.

These factors together show that Asia is heavily involved in globalization, which experts describe as processes of interaction and integration between different nations, driven, among other factors, by trade, banking and facilitated by information technology. Grataloup (2007: 43) adds that the ‘history of the construction of the world is largely that of the means of communication’. That point then takes us to the core of this book on ‘communicating with Asia’.

Data such as on population growth (or decline), the distribution of ethnicities, migration, student populations and so on, relate to languages and allow us to turn to factors that respond to the communicative and linguistic challenges. We need to understand the diversity of languages within nations and regions, their distribution, domains of use, respective status and functions as well as their competition with each other. Which languages are used more widely than others? Which local or outside languages are used and needed? What has to be done to meet the needs of some languages or, in other cases, reduce the

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investment in less needy languages? Not everything will, can or should be seen from an economic angle alone. Other factors to do with history, tradition, nation-building, migrations, identities or equity may be adduced to justify policies. Socio-psychological and other approaches may be called for to investigate and interpret responses and the successes or failures of policies.

Estimates vary considerably, but Asia has currently around 4.3 billion inhabitants, according to the Population Reference Bureau (2014) and, thus, the largest proportion of the world's population. Despite this overall growth, East Asia will decline somewhat by 2050, while the Middle East, South and South-East Asia will grow considerably; South Asia will, in fact, grow considerably from 1.806 million to 2.422 million inhabitants. But compared with Africa, Asia's proportion of the world population will be declining, as the fertility rate in Africa is considerably higher. Such data allow projections into the future of languages. French and some African languages might benefit from that growth. But on a global scale, there is no competitor for English yet in sight and for the foreseeable decades, its future as a world language is secure. It relies heavily on the continuity of its status, functions, educational and other support systems in Asia. But there is change on the way underneath, as Graddol's (2006) projection into the future of world languages shows. He confirms the results of a lot of applied research into the macro-sociology and macro-economics of languages in Asia. And some of Asia's languages rise fast in terms of their regional and global standing.

The British Council published a list of the most important ten foreign languages needed in the United Kingdom in 2013. To quote:

The Languages for the Future report identifies Spanish, Arabic, French, Mandarin Chinese, German, Portuguese, Italian, Russian, Turkish and Japanese as the languages most vital to the UK over the next 20 years. They were chosen based on economic, geopolitical, cultural and educational factors including the needs of UK businesses, the UK's overseas trade targets, diplomatic and security priorities, and prevalence on the internet.²

The list contains five Asian languages, that is, Arabic, Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, Russian and Turkish. With the exception of Turkish, these languages will be dealt with in this book. Four languages deserve some comment. Arabic reaches well beyond Asia and into North Africa, whereas Turkish (or Turkic languages) penetrates into most of Central Asia. Both have significant diasporas in, for example, Europe. The absence of the Hindi–Urdu complex is surprising. It is used in a vast and expanding area in South Asia and Indian diasporas in South-East Asia, where it competes with Tamil and some other Indian languages. Its absence from the top ten could also be related to the dominance of English in South Asia and reflect the persistent heritage of British

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colonialism. India had planned to abolish English by 1962 but that did not happen and its retention was seen as an asset. Russian should not be forgotten, as it is the dominant language in North-East Asia, a lingua franca along the Russian–Chinese border and an important language in post-Soviet countries of Central Asia, where it used to be the official and educational language. Mandarin Chinese must be added for its expansion into the north of South-East Asia, that is, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam. It has large diasporic communities across Asia (and Australia) that follow its norms. Cantonese, Hokkien and other varieties of Chinese cannot be overlooked either. Malay and the distantly related Java, too, are large languages with a wide geographic distribution and used to be lingua francas up to the mid-nineteenth century.

And English in Asia? It is a language whose largest number of users live in Asia and many experts treat it as an Asian language. But when it came with the British East India Company from 1600 onward, it succeeded other languages of wider communication, such as Portuguese in Malaya in South-East Asia, Chinese dialects around the 1930s, French in former Indo-China and others. It is now used by Asian multilinguals as a lingua franca (Bolton 2010; Kirkpatrick 2010a). It dominates in many of the regional communicative networks. Thus, when a decision on ASEAN's language(s) was made, there was no real debate but English was just taken for granted even by former non-colonies such as Thailand. It has also been argued that English is a language of pragmatism in ASEAN, that it is 'not an emotive language that can express a regional cultural content' (Kumar and Siddique 2008; quoted in Milner 2011a: 115). Echoing many poets in Asia, the Singaporean poet-laureate, Edwin Thumboo, says that when he uses English, he does not feel tied to its ancestral (British) culture. He 'owns' it, has made it a language of himself. That may be a frequent sentiment in ASEAN nations or South Asia. He also vehemently rejects the term 'postcolonial' for Singapore and other nations. They were global before they became local and are new nations or, in the region, ASEAN nations and free to choose their future paths. Kirkpatrick (2010a) may be close to the detached cultural view of Thumboo, though he identifies features of English that are common across ASEAN. Do these views reflect a light level of re-culturation, while local forms in India and so on bear evidence of high levels of a new cultural embedding? The study of Arabic loans (Azirah and Leitner, Chapter 6, this volume) shows another layer, that is, that of common Arabic loans in the varieties of English found in the Islamic majority countries in South and South-East Asia. It is not devoid of emotive content.

The debates about the communicative space and the functions assigned to languages generally are about an Asian language and English and bilingualism involving many local languages being reduced to an Asian language and English. The potential challenges and benefits are reduced. According to Graddol (1997, 2006), Asia is the continent with the largest proportion of

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English speakers. Even if their numbers are comparatively small and nationally unevenly distributed between the country and the cities, their total numbers in China and India exceed the figures of Great Britain, Australia, Canada or New Zealand together. Disregarding the differences between second and foreign language at this point, these figures lift English into the rank of one of the largest Asian languages, close to Mandarin and Hindi–Urdu. Given it is mainly used by the educated and moneyed middle classes, its ‘buying’ power is considerable. In a caste-ridden society like India’s, it is also more democratic, giving access to the global world of the Internet to anyone who has the technical equipment and is able to use it. As a result, it is more neutral and more ‘modern’ in terms of cultural and religious associations.

Graddol’s British Council reports address the future of the economically significant English Language Teaching (ELT) industry in Great Britain (and other Anglophone nations). Three findings go beyond the Council’s immediate concerns and are relevant to this book. The first is that the ELT industry will have to undergo a paradigm shift, as English transforms from foreign or second language to a basic skill similar to literacy and numeracy. This means that many subject teachers will teach in English, and it would be unrealistic to expect of university systems worldwide that they require students of, say, mathematics or geography, to do a degree in ELT. Learner English and local varieties are bound to increase in visibility and input as a result. That may lead governments in many Asian countries to reconsider their stand on nativized English, such as in Malaysia or Singapore. Colloquial Malaysian English, sometimes referred to as ‘Manglish’ or, in Singapore, as ‘Singlish’, may acquire a more positive status when they become inescapable and also a partial asset (Leitner 2014). As a deeper understanding of the changes in regional and national forms of English (and of other regional languages) and of their impact on the realities of teaching will be required, we need to turn to a discussion of the meaning of ‘understanding’ of cultures and of inter-culturalism in and through English, which is an issue pursued in several chapters, but mainly in Stilz’s chapter in this volume.

Graddol’s (1997, 2006) second finding is related to the fact that English will share its global role with French in terms of official language status and similar criteria. It will no longer have the same proportion of speakers as before. Furthermore, communication in and with Asian countries will show a high level of code-switching. In light of this, it will be, at least, useful to rethink foreign language needs, and the role of ‘smaller’ but by no means insignificant languages will have to be debated. Finally, these findings call for a broad set of measures to manage national language habitats and to empower their citizens for communication with the world around them. Debates about communication within and across large geopolitical regions will acquire an acute political slant.

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Such themes address the future of English and are being addressed in this book. They take us back to the theme of expanding languages. Research tends to confine itself to former colonial languages, such as English, French, Portuguese and Spanish (in the region), as nativized ‘postcolonial’ varieties develop away from their parental input from Europe as a result of migration, exploitation or econo-cultural contact. In such scenarios, languages acquire local varieties and become pluricentric.³ This is neither inescapable nor the only avenue for languages, as can be seen in the expansion of Hindi–Urdu into the south of India. Religious ideologies, as in the case of Arabic, or an exo-normative orientation, as in the case of Mandarin in Singapore and Malaysia, can halt such fragmentation tendencies. And that holds true also of Korean and Japanese, which are promoted by econo-cultural contact across Asia but without a sign of pluricentricity.

Pluricentricity and the re-definition of English as a basic skill may herald the decline of the traditional native speaker. Non-native speakers, who are often much cheaper, may be equally good or better placed to teach a language in and for particular regions. Linguistic expansion of some languages also accelerates bilingualism and code-switching; borrowing and youth languages are significant additional characteristics that reflect the dynamism in Asia’s languages habitats.

English, whose progress may be slowing and setting new agendas for ELT, may no longer provide the best perspective. Many experts rightly emphasize the broad linguistic contexts in which English operates and in which other languages acquire significance. Such a perspective is developed here. Unavoidably, English still is a focal language but due space is given to the regions in which other major languages are used and develop. We will condense some important themes that are discussed in the following chapters around some relevant issues.

English is, as we have said repeatedly, a central language in Asia. The traditional distinction between native, second and foreign language that found its place in Braj Kachru’s Three-Circles Model (1992) would suggest – *pace* Edwin Thumboo – dividing Asian nations into former Anglophone colonies, such as India, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines on the one hand and non-Anglophone colonies and Thailand on the other. Kachru’s model would imply that the varieties of English developing in countries with an Anglophone colonial past would be part of the Expanding Circle and would move away from British and American English norms and expressions. They may arrive at norms of their own. Singapore and India are prime examples. Others would be at various stages toward that endpoint such as Malaysia or stagnate or stabilize on the way such as Pakistan. Countries with no Anglophone colonial past such as Thailand were put into the Expanding Circle with no norm-setting potential. But increasingly, local developments are

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visible (sometimes under the influence of the region) and the model accepts them in former non-colonies, such as Thailand or China, as ‘Englishes’ with nascent norms of their own. This issue is taken up in Part I. A particularly relevant and fairly new function of English is that of a lingua franca. Its study was initiated by Andy Kirkpatrick with a team of collaborators in a number of countries in South-East Asia (Kirkpatrick 2010a).⁴ He reports on that project that looks at English used intra-regionally and discusses its possible consequences in educational policies, including the skillset that is required to communicate with Asia. Quite clearly, English as a lingua franca (ELF) competes with English as a foreign (or international) language in other domains and both may incorporate (or reject) local features. Other chapters look at such developments. Tariq Rahman, for instance, addresses English in Pakistan and the important area of code-switching, which is at the centre of normative disputes. He salvages it with references to Persian–Urdu code-switching in the medieval period. Pramod Pandey deals with prosody and intonation in Indian English, a neglected field of study. He argues that Indian English is by no means uniform here and that there are significant departures from British English. Danilo Dayag, in contrast, addresses a widely researched area in native English, namely pied-piping and preposition stranding but with a special focus on Philippine English. Michael Percillier, Tan Siew Imm and Ying-Ying Tan take a similar line to Dayag’s in separate chapters and turn to lexical, grammatical and phonological characteristics of South-East Asian varieties of English. Percillier compares Singapore, Malaysian and Indonesian English, which all contain Malay as a substrate. Tan Siew Imm looks at common multiword verbal combinations in Singapore English and their stabilization, and Ying-Ying Tan investigates the influence of American English on Singaporean English. She focuses on rhoticization and some pronunciation features and compares their use between two different age groups.

Some chapters on English take a pedagogical and applied linguistic stance and emphasize, by implication, the role that teaching methodology and textbooks can have on local English. While Nobuyuki Hino addresses that topic for the Japanese, his chapter mainly narrates the history of teaching methods and the recent shift from Anglo-American English to English for international communication for global participation. The teaching of English is not merely a skill but is taught in a specific cultural framework. Similarly, Ee-Ling Low and Rachel Tan Siew Kuang adopt an applied linguistic approach in their chapter, which compares the language policies in both Malaysia and Singapore as well as the diverging varieties, and illustrate this with an acoustic study of the divergent phonological features of Malaysians and Singaporeans. Because these chapters go beyond the usual debates about the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages and English as a culture-less skill, they contribute a lot to the central theme of communicating with Asia. In

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a number of countries, a British or American cultural background continues to be taught (though one can hardly speak of a monolithic British and American culture anymore) and made accessible along with the language, whereas in others, such as in English as a lingua franca context, English is reduced to a mere skill.

The chapter by Azirah Hashim and Gerhard Leitner pursues an under studied theme, that is, language contact between Arabic and English. Arabic played a significant role during the pre-Islamic period and, more so, from the coming of Islam and continues to do so. They reveal a new layer of lexis and the effect of Islamization that enriches Malaysian English (and other varieties of English in Asia), which also separates off Malay Muslims from other ethnicities.

The chapters in Part II look beyond English. Complementing Tariq Rahman's chapter on the development of English in Pakistan and its interaction with other languages, with a glance at the common history with India, Tej Bhatia and William Ritchie look at the Hindi–Urdu complex from a historical perspective. Although the two languages are separated by two different scripts, that is, Arabic for Urdu and Devanaageri for Hindi, they are grouped together on the basis of their structural features. That is a linguistic judgment, which may facilitate communication with foreigners proficient in one of them. It remains to be seen how much headway that gives them if one includes the large diasporas in South-East Asia and the Pacific.

Malay has a long research history (e.g., Asmah Haji Omar 2013). Beng Soon Lim and Gloria Poedjosoedarmo, too, take a historical line but foreground the mixed character of Malay and its significant Indian heritage across the vast area where it is spoken. They discuss the standardization of the two varieties of Malay as well as the differences arising from language planning and policy in the different countries. The point that Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Malaysia (or Melayu) differ more than the two major strands of English in Great Britain and the United States is well to bear in mind in light of communicating with Asia. It is worth adding that the Malaysian and Indonesian governments are taking steps to narrow the widening gap between the two varieties. The *New Straits Times* reports on a visit of the Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin to Indonesia in early April this year, where he said “the two languages had many similarities since they both come from the same root. ‘It will be our language of communication and will help improve further our diplomatic and bilateral ties.’” He added that a technical committee will be set up “to get language experts from both countries to study the matter, adding that this initiative had been discussed some time back, but never came to fruition” (April 8, 2015, www.nst.com.my/node/79908).

Two chapters are concerned with China, Hong Kong and Macau. Chan Shui-Duen tells the history of Mandarin (alternatively *Putonghua*) and Cantonese in mainland China and the Territories. The growth of near-universal

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literacy is a major achievement in such a vast country. The limited spread of *Putonghua* in the Territories shows the vitality of Cantonese and probably of other languages even in an era of globalization. Wang Xiaomei's chapter deals with Chinese languages in the South-East Asian diaspora and specifically Malaysia. She gives an account of the spread and standardization of Chinese and its contact with other languages and predicts that Malaysian Mandarin will retain its regional characteristics and become the lingua franca of Malaysian Chinese. Although both chapters also illustrate the pluricentricity of Mandarin, it is worth adding that pluricentricity is a matter-of-fact but not one in educational language politics. A call for an 'international' variety of Mandarin or, as in English, the use and teaching of local, say, Singaporean norms, is not in sight anywhere.

Two chapters turn to some understudied areas in North-East and Central Asia. The role of Russian in Far East Asia is the theme of Roxana Doncu. At different periods of time, ethnic languages were periodically suppressed or permitted. While English is making headway, Russian still is the dominant language in the region and frequently used as lingua franca in trade and other business along the Russian–Chinese border, with repercussions on trade relations with Korea and Japan. English is not sufficient to meet the linguistic demands and realities of this region, one might think. Zoya Proshina extends the main area of this book into Central Asia and discusses the shifting policies in the post-Soviet states of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. These nations are quite affluent and growing commercial partners with South-East Asia. That role is enhanced because most of them are Islamic, as are some nations in South-East Asia.

The third part deals with another major theme of 'Communicating with Asia', that is, of understanding and accessing Asia's cultures. An obvious response to that suggestion is that Asia's diversity and richness of cultures cannot be understood as a single entity. True, but the television channel 'Channel NewsAsia', which is owned by Temasek, a Singaporean government company and foundation, promises precisely that in its catchphrase 'Understanding Asia'. Its correspondent network stretches across South, South-East and East Asia, the UAE and Australia. The English voice is solidly educated Singaporean English, and although it is an English language channel, Channel NewsAsia does not always dub other languages; thus, other languages can be heard. Understanding in this context refers to the mediated selection and interpretation of events from an 'Asian' angle.

Gerhard Stütz addresses the question of whether English can be used for cultural understanding on such a large scale at a deeper theoretical and literary level. Restricting himself to South Asia and specifically India, he rejects a narrow Sapir-Whorfian language–culture link that posits a one-to-one relation between 'a' language and 'a' culture. He maintains that English, like any

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other natural language, has or can have the linguistic means to mediate South Asia's cultures and realities. From a cognitive-linguistic angle that, in its philosophical outlook, is similar to the position taken by Stolz, Hans-Georg Wolf and Thomas Chan analyze the concept of GHOST and respective conceptualizations in Hong Kong English and Chinese thought at large. Their chapter shows that cultural conceptualizations can have a real impact on people's daily life and society as a whole. With their methodology and a respective application in the lexicography of variety dictionaries, Wolf and Chan propose a way of how intercultural understanding can be achieved by means of analyzing linguistic varieties. A much more functionalist perspective emerges from Andy Kirkpatrick's approach to English as a lingua franca in South-East Asia. Kirkpatrick proposes, among other things, courses in intercultural communication using English as lingua franca for both native and non-native speakers of English, whose purpose it would be to raise awareness of the diversity of the varieties of English spoken in the region and overcome problems of mutual intelligibility.

The theme of language needs, their elicitation in language planning and the steps to be taken to meet them were mentioned above in connection with Graddol's British Council reports. Joseph Lo Bianco was central to the formulation of Australia's language policies in the 1980s; he has been active in many reports in other parts of the world such as Scotland, the Council of Europe and Malaysia. Joseph Lo Bianco and Yvette Slaughter reject a superficial socio-economic approach and take a long-term view, still claiming that Australia has been successful in embedding itself in the region and being seen as a serious player there. Australia can be a useful model for Europe, if Australia succeeds in activating its available Asian language heritage and implements policies to mainstream and to enlarge it.

NOTES

- 1 Though the scope of this present book is primarily on language, we understand 'communication' in a much broader sense than a linguistic one, to include such notions as cultural, economic and intellectual intercourse and sharing (cf. *OED online*), an understanding that conforms to the habitat approach we outline here.
- 2 www.britishcouncil.org/sites/britishcouncil.uk2/files/languages-for-the-future-report-v3.pdf shows the foreign languages the UK needs most.
- 3 For a critical debate, see Leitner (1992).
- 4 The corpus collection and technical matters have been completed and is now freely available. Azirah Hashim was the head of the Malaysian component (see Kirkpatrick 2010a).